

WOMEN’S INTEREST IN ‘QUEER LITERATURE’:
A CASE ON BL IN CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA

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BOĞAZİÇİ UNİVERSİTY

2025

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Thesis submitted to the
Institute for Graduate Studies in Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Asian Studies

by
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Boğaziçi University

2025

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ABSTRACT

Women's Interest in 'Queer Literature':

A Case on BL in China and South Korea

Boys Love (BL) is a genre produced by women for women that is dedicated on depicting romantic and sexual relationships between two males. It has originated in Japan during the 1970s, quickly spreading its neighbors China and South Korea where it has gained a remarkable popularity which it now enjoys in a global scale. This study traces BL's journey from Japan to China and South Korea while presenting social backgrounds on the aforementioned nations. This thesis argues that BL has emerged initially as a result of a feminist response against the women's repressed positions in society as an outlet for them to relieve their frustrations, becoming a realm to have fun through 'playing with gender' in time, hence in its essence it does not aim to represent queer identities and it does not define itself as queer therefore it is not political from a queer perspective and it cannot be classified as 'queer literature.' This study also argues that the difference in the level of severity in the reactions toward BL content by the Chinese and Korean states is due to their different tactics on how they generate consent from the people and how they position and utilize soft power as a tool in their endeavor for integrating to the global economy.

ÖZET

‘Kuir Edebiyata’ Kadınların İlgisi:

Çin ve Güney Kore’de BL Üzerine Bir Çalışma

Boys Love (BL) iki erkek arasındaki romantik ve cinsel ilişkileri anlatmak üzere kadınlar için kadınlar tarafından üretilen bir edebi türdür. 1970’li yıllarda Japonya’da ortaya çıkmış ve hızla günümüzde global düzeyde de yakaladığı bir popüleriteye kavuştuğu komşu ülkeler olan Çin ve Güney Kore’ye yayılmıştır. Bu çalışma BL’in Japonya’dan Çin ve Güney Kore’ye uzanan macerasının izini sürerken aynı zamanda bu iki ülkeye dair sosyal arka plan da sunmaktadır. Bu tez, BL türünün kadınların toplumdaki bastırılmış pozisyonlarına olan hayal kırıklıklarına bir çıkış yaratmak üzere feminist bir reaksiyon olarak ortaya çıktığını, ardından zaman içinde kadınların ‘cinsiyetle oynayabilecekleri’ bir alan hâline geldiğini, kendini de kuir olarak tanımlamadığını bundan sebeple de özünde kuir kimlikleri temsil gibi bir amaç gütmmediğini, yani kuir açıdan politik olmadığını ve ‘kuir edebiyat’ olarak adlandırılmayacağını savunur. Bu çalışma aynı zamanda BL içeriklere karşı Çin ve Güney Kore devletlerinin reaksiyonlarının sertliklerindeki farklılığın bu iki devletin halklarından rıza üretmekte kullandıkları farklı yöntemler ve ‘yumuşak gücü’ global ekonomiye eklemlenme amacı doğrultusunda farklı yerlere konumlandırıp farklı şekilde yararlanmalarından kaynaklandığını savunur.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis was made possible by the guidance, support, and encouragement of my dear advisor and mentor Assist. Prof. Ceren Ergenç Glauberman with whom I had discussions that improved me both academically and personally, and by my dear advisor Zeyneb Hale Eroğlu Sağer whose unwavering support, sympathy, and guidance has aided me in my academic journey, and by the support, knowledge, wisdom, and sincerity I have received from all my professors and instructors at Boğaziçi University.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude for my dear parents, and my dear uncle who have always supported me in my dreams, encouraged me to walk the path that I wished, and believed me from day one. I love you and thank you, always.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Boys Love (BL from now on) is a genre that has been gaining popularity and visibility for almost a decade on a global scale. Originated in Japan, the genre which tells stories about love and sexual relationships between two men has spread to the neighboring countries China and South Korea. BL content has received much love from women in Japan, China, and South Korea. Therefore, it can be seen that the genre is created by women for women as a form of entertainment free from the repressions these societies put on women. BL provides women with a safe place to explore, enjoy, and experiment with gender and sexual dynamics without objectifying themselves in order to do so. Over the course of BL's rise, many discussions had on whether gay men identify with the genre, or the genre represents queer experiences, whether it is homophobic or not, and the reason for its emergence in the first place. It is argued to be political having the power to change the discourse on queerness in these countries over time.

In this context, some questions have arisen with regards to the genre and its background. First of all, why has BL, a predominantly women-produced and women-consumed genre, has emerged from Japan and been absorbed into China and South Korea, which have different regimes and social compositions on the outside, and gained a solid fan base and popularity? What is the reason behind this genre's women-dominant nature despite the main protagonists being men? What is the reason behind the different reactions from the governments of China and South Korea towards BL or are they actually that different in their motivations? And finally, is BL political and can it be classified as queer literature?

To answer these questions, I examine the societal and cultural backgrounds of China and South Korea, as well as the feminist and anti-feminist contexts in these societies in order to better grasp the situation of women in chapters 2 and 3. In Chapter 4, I illustrate what BL is exactly as a genre and its journey from its emergence in Japan to its spread to China and South Korea. In Chapter 5, I try to answer the questions regarding to the reason of BL's emergence, the reactions from Korean and Chinese governments, and whether BL is political and a genre of queer literature by discussing these questions in relation with Gramscian and Foucauldian framework as well as concepts regarding to their 'compressed modernization,' nationalistic tendencies, Confucian past, along with feminist, and queer theories. In Chapter 6, I conclude that the repressed position of women in their highly gendered and conservative society resulted in the BL genre as an outlet for women initially. The rapid modernization experienced in China and South Korea allowed contradicting conservative and regressive notions and traditions to exist along with modern and liberal notions and practices, which is illustrated in the emergent sexual youth cultures of these nations. I explain and illustrate the similar motivations behind the Chinese and South Korean governments' reactions towards BL and anything that challenges their ideological hegemony, such as the feminist movement. Even though the level of severity in their reactions may be different due to several reasons, such as their different paths to modernization, current international policies, and how they position soft power as a strategy in their motivations for integrating into the global economy, their motivation in upholding their status quo remains common. Finally, I argue that BL emerged as a way for women to 'have fun' independent of the repressions and inequalities they face in their societies. By playing with any gender and sexual constructions, they 'have fun' hence, in its essence, BL is a pornography

from the 'female-gaze' produced and consumed for entertainment by women. The characters are heterosexual males who happen to fall in love or desire another man. Being gay or any other queer identity are not acknowledged rather there are plenty of homophobic components in the narratives. Hence, BL is not political in the sense of providing a platform for LGBTQ+ causes or identities. Thus, I argue that its emergence was due to feminist motivation in its essence. It is still arguable and requires further studies whether BL is political in the feminist sense since most of its consumers and creators are heterosexual women who are in heteronormative relationships without political involvements in real life. Therefore, I do not think that BL belongs to queer literature in the sense that it does not identify itself as such and has no such aims. Also, the main characters themselves, again, do not identify or acknowledge themselves as queer or gay.

Before venturing further into the complexities of Korean and Chinese societies, the reason for which they are chosen to be compared must be explained and justified in the first place. My encounter with BL, which may sound familiar to many from my generation, happened through consuming anime and manga of Japanese origin. Throughout the years, I have consumed many works from many different genres until I encountered the one that was referred to as *yaoi* in Western online platforms, formed by fans. *Yaoi*, in that context, referred to the stories of love, romance, and intimacy between two men. Around 2013-2014, Japanese works were more dominant in those websites that translated and scanlated¹ manga for English-speaking fans around the world. *Yaoi* as a category included works from South Korea (Korea from here onward) and China as well. Until around 2015, these platforms

¹ Fan-made scanning, editing, and translation of comics from one language to another.

translated and published works from Japanese origin while *yaoi* kept being used as an umbrella term encompassing works from Japan, China, and Korea.

After 2015, however, things have started to change when works from Korea, especially webtoons² which were designed to be read from smart phones, has emerged. This provided an unparalleled kind of visibility to Korean works from all genres. Even though the history of webtoons goes back to early 2000s domestically, 2015 marked a turning point for both Lezhin Comics and Korean webtoons in general. In 2015, Lezhin Comics launched its services for English speaking communities. Which meant that fans had the opportunity to gain access to both visually and content-wise high quality works with professional translations which saved fans from struggling to guess the real meaning behind amateur fan translations and unevenly cropped scenes. They also had a larger pool of content to choose from without being dependent on any intermediaries, such as fans from Korean diaspora or fans that have learned Korean, who chose and translated works on behalf of the general fan base. This revolutionary move from Korea opened up the influx of Korean works and thus Korean influence on *yaoi* online. From 2015 onwards, the term *yaoi* started to be reserved in majority for works from Japanese origin while the term BL has started to replace it in general usage. In recent years, BL is started being used as a term even for works from Japan. According to expertmarketresearch.com, Korean webtoon had a market value of nearly USD 1.54 billion in 2024.³

Even though not as abundant as its Korean counterpart, Chinese⁴ webtoons of BL, milder and subtle with their depictions of both physical and emotional matters,

² Digital comics that originated in Korea during the early 2000s. It provides an easy reading experience for smartphone users since its format is one long strip rather than multiple pages.

³ Claight Corporation (Expert Market Research), “South Korea Webtoons Market Size, Share, Analysis 2025-2034.”

⁴ Webtoons that are produced in mainland-China.

appeared in those websites from time to time as well. Referred to as *danmei*, Chinese BL works followed a different path than that of Korea's, adopted a different medium: web novels that are in written form. Contrary to what Bai (2021)⁵ argues, I argue that the main reason why the medium of web novel is preferred is the heavy censorship implemented by the Chinese government, not the lack of skill or talent for drawing comics by Chinese artists. In recent years many influential *danmei* works which were translated to English by the hard work of fans are getting licensed legally by Western publishers. Chinese BL scene has showed so much potential even with the limited space it had. By obscuring the male-male story line or changing it altogether, Chinese *danmei* works got the opportunity to be adopted into animations, games, web comics etc. domestically. The demand for *danmei* is obvious even just from how much work is written domestically, and also translated and licensed abroad. Chinese *danmei*/BL sphere would flourish spectacularly if writers/creators had the creative freedom to produce without censorship laws or the worry of being arrested.

My continued interest in BL throughout the years has given me the opportunity to witness the genre's evolution in Korea and China. Of course, as someone from neither Korea nor China this witnessing is limited to the perspective of English speaking fan community and what has been projected to that community. I do not have much domestic insight regarding to the fan bases of BL from neither of these countries besides the academic research conducted on the topic that I have sought and analyzed. Hence, this discussion is limited in its sources to the academic work in English that has been conducted on BL and BL content that are translated into English. In this sense, even though discussions in local languages hold high value in illuminating the literary value of the BL and the dynamics of fandoms, state

⁵ Meijiadai Bai, "Regulation of Pornography and Criminalization of BL Readers and Authors in Contemporary China (2010–2019)," 2.

policies also impact and shape how BL literature is produced and consumed.

Therefore, my analysis on how Chinese and Korean states react toward BL literature and their strategies in forming consent as well as defining the sexual discourses in their respective nations provides a different perspective to the current BL discourse by both illustrating the impact of state power through state policies and how that power is utilized differently.

Hence, two different attitudes from the governments of two of the most prolific producers of BL presented an interesting question considering their common background through a shared Confucian tradition and their great economic leap and how these attitudes reflected on BL content itself. What is more interesting is the fact that initially, Korea preferred to censor works that illustrated homosexual relationships which included this genre as well. Yet, further down the road it chose a different path in its official attitude towards these types of content. On the one hand, Korea a highly economically-driven nation, turned BL into a market and has been gaining considerable profit from it, on the other hand, China also a highly economically-driven nation is ignoring this market's potential and overtly censors BL. Thus, what has fascinated and urged me to embark on this study was these dynamics of two countries which also manifested through their reactions to BL and the motivations behind their actions. Are they really different from each other in their reactions and their motivations, or are there any common motivations and actions between them?

To carry our discussion further, the term queerness used here in relation to BL and BL content must be defined. There seems to be a controversy surrounding the term 'queer' itself in LGBTQ+ community as well. Although queer used to be a derogatory term used against LGBTQ+ people, some queer activists have decided to

reclaim the term in a positive light during the 1980s.⁶ However, there are people who oppose this positive reclamation of the term because they associate the term “queer” with its previous derogatory usage, with queer radicalism emphasizing difference and marginality.⁷ Nowadays, the term queer is associated with sexual and gender identities that remain outside of the traditional heterosexual and heteronormative construction.⁸ It also has political connotations due to the LGBTQ+ movement. As it was stated earlier, there is some degree of controversy relating to the term hence it is advised the term should not be used without permission toward an LGBTQ+ individual. In academia on the other hand, the term queer is associated with “queer studies” and “queer theory.” Queer studies focuses on issues surrounding sexuality, gender, and other marginalized identities. It explores how culture constructs sexuality and how it effects social institutions in return.⁹ Queer theory, which initially evolved from Foucault’s theories through Judith Butler’s studies in the 1990s, examines and critiques society’s definitions of gender and sexuality. It focuses what is outside of the traditional heterosexual “norms” of gender and sexuality.

In this study I use queer and queerness to denote people who are not heterosexual and/or people who are not cis-gendered, and also non-heterosexual contents of BL from Korean and Chinese entertainment and cultural industries. BL takes men as its main characters and tells stories about their love and relationship hence it may be thought that using ‘gay’ rather than ‘queer’ to define them and the content may be more appropriate. However, I argue that since both LGBTQ+ identities, politics, and LGBTQ+ as a concept is not acknowledged in these works

⁶ McMahon, “Is “Queer” a Derogatory Word?”

⁷ Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?” 395-396.

⁸ Collins English Dictionary, “Queer Definition and Meaning.”

⁹ Denison University, “Queer Studies.”

using the term ‘gay’ may cause confusion since it is readily associated and is one of the identities that constitutes LGBTQ+ movement. The terms queer and queerness on the other hand, provide the necessary vagueness to represent the absence of political identities in BL while also giving the non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender context.



CHAPTER 2

CONFUCIANISM OR SOCIALIST ETHIC?

CHINESE SOCIETAL MORES, NORMS, AND TRADITIONS

This section aims to discuss what are the factors that shape Chinese culture, societal mores, norms, and traditions. As Chinese history itself can bear witness, this ancient civilization has undergone many changes, transformations, and also formed deeply rooted notions, thought/belief systems, and mores. At the risk of oversimplification and overgeneralization, Confucianism and Socialist revolution can be counted as the most formative and transformative concepts in Chinese history. Formative in the sense that Confucianism has a history dating back to thousands of years, being a core element in shaping the very Chinese culture itself. Confucianism not only shaped matters of state and state-ruling but also shaped the dynamics of society, family, and interpersonal relationships. Socialist revolution on the other hand, can be regarded as a break or an attempt of break from the “Four Olds”¹⁰ of Chinese culture which represented the ancient order of Chinese tradition and culture. Even though, it did not manage to break completely from the old ways or uproot all the practices and mores, it created rapid changes that, at least on paper, upended some aspects of the old order and created opportunities for it to be challenged and changed in the future. Then again, a mindset cumulated through thousands of years’ worth of practice could not be easily replaced or overthrew. As Liu (2024) argues, there is so much more to the Chinese culture and way of life than the recent socialist revolution. Confucianism and the concepts it emphasizes such as filial piety, hegemonic masculinity, gender

¹⁰ “Old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits” in Liu, “Chinese Culture with Socialist Characteristics,” 13.

roles, and *guanxi*¹¹ etc. are so deeply rooted in a society that has thousands of years of practice that the last hundred years which saw China endeavoring to transform and adapt to the new world system as a result of the humiliation it suffered by the hands of Western nations during 1840s to 1940s, could not manage to uproot.

The huge impacts of the socialist reform had on the Chinese society or the achievements and changes the reform caused in Chinese culture cannot be denied. However, it is a relatively new occurrence in the context of Chinese history compared to Confucianism. Actually, China had not compromised of its cultural essence even with the revolution. As the term “socialism with Chinese characteristics” clearly indicates, socialist ideology, in the context of Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has not been purely adopted and implemented by abandoning anything that was considered to be old and backwards. Rather it was shaped by the characteristics of Chinese society, Chinese culture, and Chinese identity that inherently exist. As it can be attested from the records of the period, memoirs and experiences of the contemporary people, and studies examining the period, socialist ethic did not fully penetrate into the way of life or the traditions or completely transformed them but rather it was adopted by the government and seems to be effective in the state-ideology and the legal sphere. Of course, through government propaganda and pressure some practices have changed, new concepts came to be implemented however, the core elements and beliefs remained consistent and in time the communist/socialist ideology came to be assimilated into Chinese culture resulting in what is referred to as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Liu (2024) names three core elements of Chinese culture: “family relations, social

¹¹ “The network that connects members of one family with members of another.” See Liu, “Chinese Culture with Socialist Characteristics,” 8.

relations, and people-government relations”¹² and places the family culture as the foundation of Chinese culture. It is true that “the family culture” has defied change despite Communist/socialist ethic and allowed a way for the traditional way of life and mindset to thrive on a certain level.

Of course, the intention here is not to argue that everything in China remains traditional and according to Confucian ethics. Two important post-Mao reforms: One Child Policy (1980-2015) and Open Door Policy (1978) had tremendous effects on Chinese sociological sphere therefore Chinese culture may be experiencing a transition period negotiating between thousands of years of tradition and new liberal and global concepts such as sexuality, sexual freedom, freedom of choice, self-expression, gender equality, feminism, LGBTQ+ movement, etc. A new way of life based on consumerist principles which is an outcome of not only modern interactions with the West but also the new neoliberal capitalist order has also emerged. It seems that China is trying to reconcile and resolve this conflict through a Chinese-exclusive way without completely being assimilated but by assimilating the foreign into Chinese. However, it would be futile to expect certain notions of Confucian ethics such as filial piety, importance of family, and *guanxi* to experience a drastic transformation or disappear altogether. When a civilization survives through all kinds of turbulations for thousands of years whatever got people through hard times tend to be cemented and adopted even more.¹³ For the Chinese case, the collectivist mindset prioritizing family over individual and the network of social relations based on benefit promoted groups in a society that stick together through thick and thin providing resilience for people through social support remain effective. On another note, Confucianism, which was both born out of Chinese way of life and shaped the

¹² Liu, “Chinese Culture with Socialist Characteristics,” 12.

¹³ Ibid., 6.

very culture, filial piety is a crucial obligation for descendants of a family to carry out. Apart from obeying and serving one's parents and ancestors in this life and beyond, one is responsible for carrying on the family lineage. One must procreate and raise the next generation of descendants who will serve, honor, and sustain the family lineage. Thus, in a society that deems family as one's way of survival and a big part of one's identity it is not surprising that it is considered a core element of the culture. The importance put on family and continuity of lineage by Confucian teachings, and them still being emphasized uphold a patriarchal, heteronormative, and hierarchical social order while reiterating traditional gender roles.

However, to what extent this traditional mindset and practices have a reach in modern post-Mao Chinese society is something that should be discussed as well. In 1978 China, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, adopted the 'open door policy' which altered its development strategy from self-sufficiency to an active participation in world market. Following this change China's foreign trade has increased.¹⁴ Naturally, this led to increased interaction and exchange of cultures not only state-level but also between the societies of China and Western nations as well as the rest of the world. Hence, China's integration to open market economy, and to global socioeconomic arena along with its endeavor to 'be modern' in its own terms has brought new concepts such as sexuality, gender, romantic and sexual relationships, LGBTQ+ identities, freedom of choice independent of the wishes of one's family, and a new order resting on consumerism to the lives of the Chinese people. Raymond Williams' conceptualization of culture¹⁵ would be helpful in painting a better picture of and grasping one of the many intricacies of the Chinese culture now.

¹⁴ Huan, "China's Open Door Policy," 2.

¹⁵ As it is discussed in Chen, "Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China."

Culture, in this context, is regarded something as dynamic and shifting which has different stages and variations at different historical moments. It is depicted as a process of social change in which dominant, residual, and emergent elements are always at an interplay. Hence, each period witnesses the unique relations among dominant, residual and emergent elements.¹⁶ As culture is dynamic and shifting, it evolves through time and the changes manifest themselves as cultural processes. The dominant element can be explained as when a certain cultural process of a culture is seized and adopted as a cultural system with distinct aspects and features.¹⁷ The residual element refers to concepts and practices that have been formed in the past but are still effective to some degree in the present. When certain experiences, meanings, and values cannot be associated with or expressed by the dominant culture they can be explained by the residual culture since these are lived and practiced during some previous social and cultural institution or formation. Emergent element of a culture indicates “the new meanings, new values, new practices, new relationships, and kinds of relationships that are continually being created.”¹⁸ Fang (2017) applies this concept of culture from Williams to China’s changing sexual culture. Grasping China’s discourse of sexuality and gender is necessary for the following discussion of in what kind of a discourse BL has emerged and thrived in, how it is received by Chinese society, and how the Chinese state reacts to it. Understanding how sexuality and gender is experienced and viewed, what kind of social mores and mindsets are in play, hence, would provide a better point of view in the subject.

¹⁶ Chen, “Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China.”

¹⁷ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 121 in Chen, “Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China,” 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

State discourse from both Maoist and post-Mao periods form the dominant culture of sexuality in China.¹⁹ Since the party-state government has the dominant power in social and political spheres its ideological values on sexuality and marriage are the most visible and hard to ignore aspects of sexuality discourse. The party-state ideology views heterosexual marital unit as the norm. Until recently, the state strictly monitored sexuality by legal and administrative regulations.²⁰ Along with the state's official agenda and practices, the sexual mores which reiterated the state ideology and its cultural typology also remained powerful in Chinese media by state's support. Hence, the state by the hand of media exposed people to and propagated for its sexual mores. However, this dominion over social and political spheres does not necessarily mean that sexual practices in China are homogenous and solely governed by state discourse and ideology. There is also a set of values emanating from traditional Chinese culture which is still not only effective but has also been absorbed into the state ideology.²¹ The importance placed on female virginity which leads society to associate purity with virginity and to regard virginity as an asset which can give value or devalue a woman, is one aspect of residual culture of sexuality in China. The hierarchical order of society itself which is built upon gendered sexual mores is another aspect. These residual norms and practices derive from Confucian tradition and are deeply rooted into the fabric of society. This viewing of culture as a multifaceted process grants one with the opportunity to fully grasp the actual discourse of sexuality China. It is not dominated by a single concept or set of values, but rather different practices and concepts belonging to different cultural epochs are in interplay.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

²¹ Ibid., 6.

The younger generation and women from middle-class responded to these new notions and concepts. The change of thought these new concepts initiated started to effect all classes. However, as argued by Liu (2024), it is not easy for these relatively new concepts to uproot what represents and encapsulates the Confucian moral system in ‘Chinese culture’ or what ‘being Chinese’ means to people. To elaborate further, for example, family is still regarded as the most important unit of the nation. Thus, even though premarital sex is becoming more and more common among the youth, marriage and forming a family is still seen as the end goal. Even though the studies reveal the importance put on female virginity is not like what it used to be, this concept is still strong and effects the behaviors of people.²² For example, living together with a partner or engaging in sexual activities are deemed acceptable both in the eyes of the society and the couples themselves only if the couple intends to marry.²³ Hence, even though premarital sex is now a concept for both men and women, it seems that it is not widely or excessively practiced. This new sexual freedom is also a gendered one in that women are regarded as “less-than” if they engage in premarital sex, or give in to their boyfriend’s insistence before marriage, virginity is regarded as the most valuable gift a bride can present to their husbands by both men and women.²⁴ Of course, this is not to say everyone thinks that way, however, it seems like the concept still has a strong prevalence.

What is also an important point to make is that even though all these new concepts have entered the Chinese social sphere and formed a youth culture in the last couple of decades, the society is still heavily patriarchal and built on the values of hegemonic masculinity. Hence, feminism has a rather unique dynamic in this

²² Zarafonetis, “‘All They Want is a Sexy Ayi,’” 123, 126.

²³ Chen, “Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China,” 12.

²⁴ Zarafonetis, “‘All They Want Is a Sexy Ayi,’” 129-133.

context. As a result of the one-child policy enforced by the government, a new generation of “precious children” who were their families’ only hope to carry on the family name and success, has emerged. These children whether boy or a girl were provided with anything and everything they needed, all resources were spent on them, and they were expected to excel academically thus supported in any way by their families. This was a distinct separation from the past in the sense that in a typical traditional Chinese family boys have always been the priority, their education, health, future marriages, and works were always prioritized, and they got the largest share from inheritance in accordance with Confucian teachings. Girls on the other hand, were not supported the same way and were expected to marry, leave the family, and show fidelity toward their husbands’ family. With the one-child policy however, a new generation of girls were raised without witnessing such discrimination from their families, they were supported and had resources dedicated to them as much as any other boy or girl.²⁵ Hence, when they have joined the society which still operates on and constructed with patriarchal values, unlike the previous generations of women who were raised almost as second class people, who were used to the ways of the society and accepted the unfairness of the system with “it’s just the way it is” mentality, the generations after the one-child policy do not accept this injustice, question the discrimination and embrace feminism more and more.

2.1 Gender dynamics & Chinese feminism, anti-feminism

Before delving into what feminism looks like in the context of Chinese society I would like to illustrate the gender dynamics in the context of modernization.

According to Ho et al. (2018), with consumerism on the rise, the post-Mao gender

²⁵ Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,” 25.

ideology values a 'sexualized femininity' being showcased through beauty and youth.²⁶ In a hegemonically patriarchal society, women's capital has become their beauty and sexual attractiveness along with a good education, and conversational skills whereas men's capital turned into material resources and money rather than political success in the Communist Party or being a good socialist citizen. The purchasing power started to determine one's status in society.²⁷ Being modern has become an important concept in Chinese society and being a modern citizen is measured by how much and how one is able to consume. Especially, the urban middle-class is more open to adopt 'liberal' and 'consumerist' concepts that were being introduced to Chinese society such as pre-marital sex and co-habitation without marriage. The urban middle-class seems to be experiencing China as a modern nation whereas the working class tends to regard and experience China as a traditional country.²⁸ One of the probable reasons behind this is the power of consumption which allows middle class to engage and participate in the global 'modern culture.' The middle-class is more open to embrace and engage with liberal concepts or the emergent youth culture through their interactions with new concepts and culture through the education they receive abroad and/or the urban setting they reside in compared to someone who lives in a rural area and does not have the same opportunities and socio-economic setting to engage with or come across to these concepts. Of course, this does not mean that the Confucian rhetoric and ethics are completely abandoned by the middle-class. Confucian and traditional values of people are still an important part of the society as previously mentioned.

²⁶ Ibid., 20, 24.

²⁷ Zarafonetis, "'At fifteen, we know nothing!'" 66.

²⁸ Chen, "Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China," 20.

According to the Chinese middle class, ‘sexual freedom’ is an indicator of being modern.²⁹ However, this freedom comes in a gendered package as women and men are not free in the same way.³⁰ Even though, sexual freedom has increased and women started to have sexual experiences more freely than what was possible for them before, they cannot afford to be promiscuous as a man is allowed to without any judgements. And even though “virginity is not an oppressive social norm by which every woman in the society must be judged”³¹ anymore, in interpersonal relationships it still carries some relevance, and it is valued by men more than by women. With the one-child policy the concept of sex changed from as a means to procreate to something pleasurable and a source of fulfillment in a marriage. With more economic independence, increasing wealth, and the idea of sex as a tool for pleasure, premarital sex has started to become more common not just for men but for women as well. While sex was and is still regarded as a natural need for men³² women have to withheld from engaging premarital sex and protect their chastity until marriage. Even though the society has become more tolerant and open in regards to women exercising sexual freedom, female virginity still carries an importance and ‘too much’ sexual freedom enjoyed by women brings judgement.

Interestingly, boyfriends often insist on having sex while girlfriends are expected to resist these advances and protect their chastity.³³ However, in recent years premarital sex became more common along with it premarital pregnancy and abortions has increased as well. Being an unmarried mother is not a very plausible

²⁹ Zarafonetis, “‘At fifteen, we know nothing!’” 86.

³⁰ Chen, “Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China,” 17-19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³² Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,” 21, Xie, “Premarital Abortion—What Is the Harm?” 1-31 in Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,” 26, and Zarafonetis, “‘All They Want Is a Sexy Ayi,’” 125.

³³ Zarafonetis, “‘At fifteen, we know nothing!’” 88, Zarafonetis, “‘All They Want Is a Sexy Ayi,’” 123.

option with the stigmatization around it in the sense that having a baby without marriage is regarded as an irresponsible behavior from a mother.³⁴ As Zarafonetis (2017) emphasizes, in the Chinese context “a tolerance of premarital sex therefore did not necessarily translate into acceptance of the practice.”³⁵ Hence, even though modern women seem to have more freedom compared to the past, this new gendered freedom comes with a package of self-surveillance and self-discipline for women. Women have to be responsible and not get pregnant, should marry the person they have sex with, and act according to the expectations that are set for them. According to Guo (2010), in China women’s interests are still considered in association with family interests, they are defined as “wives and mothers [as well as] workers and patriotic citizens.”³⁶ In the government rhetoric they are still not perceived as their own persons, independent of any duties or appendages. They are duty bound to their families, husbands, and their nation. Hence, even though they seem to have more freedom and autonomy, sexually they are still not as free as men. Also, in the modern neoliberal capitalist context femininity has become a performance where women are still constantly indoctrinated to be beautiful, pure, petite, and meek. At the same time, they are constantly sexualized and sexually exploited by men.³⁷

According to Wu and Dong (2019), in post-Mao period with the abolishing of job security through permanent state employment and welfare provisions, a gendered re-distribution of duties occurred. Working women who have actively participated to the work force as a result of Maoist reforms, were once again handed the responsibility of childcare and household duties. In an increasingly competitive labor

³⁴ Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,” 26.

³⁵ Zarafonetis, “‘All They Want Is a Sexy Ayi’,” 127.

³⁶ Guo, “China’s Celebrity Mothers.” In Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,” 28.

³⁷ Ibid., 21-29

market³⁸ this created another drawback for women. Marketization and reform discourse helped the sexualization of the public discourse in which gender differences are re-emphasized, normalized, and naturalized. This new sexualized public discourse differed from “the de-gendered, de-sexualized, ascetic culture of the socialist past.”³⁹ Desire has become a marker of modernity, especially for the middle-class. Sex work has also increased. Women, by using their beauty and femininity, has gained access to resources that otherwise would be not possible for them to acquire. Whereas, being able to afford sex work has become a signifier of status for men.⁴⁰ At the same time, as an extension of state’s biopolitics ‘One Child Policy’ introduced the concept of ‘intensive mothering’ in order to nurture the most intelligent child.⁴¹ In time, the “return home” discourse which urged women to perform their domestic duties that they had neglected for a long time, has gained attraction, supported by the state’s Confucian agenda, and is being promoted by official rhetoric through public speeches. State discourse embraced Confucian values of filial piety, ancestral worship, benevolent authority of parents, and gender and age based hierarchical order that further encourage loyalty to the state.⁴² The party-state can be understood to assume the role of a benevolent ruler/father in this context. Hence, women’s obedience to their familial duties and obligations maintain the social order and stability.⁴³ Wu and Dong (2019) state that “urban gender gaps in

³⁸ Du and Dong, “Why do Women Have Longer Durations of Unemployment than Men in Post-Restructuring Urban China?” and Liu, *Gender and Work in Urban China* in Wu and Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?” 7.

³⁹ Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. In Wu and Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?” 7.

⁴⁰ Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics.”

⁴¹ Wu and Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?” 7.

⁴² Ibid., 8.

⁴³ Hird, “Xi Jinping’s Family Values,” in Wu and Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?” 8. (The link provided in Wu and Dong is no longer available hence the content can be reached from: https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/39b8f380581bc56456d8bec580a7ded2544d03dd3d407790613478cf6e9d2cce/48201/Hird_Xi%20Family%20Values.pdf)

labor force participation, unemployment rate, and income have dramatically widened”⁴⁴ even though the gender disparities in education have been decreasing. The government’s demeanor in legal sphere also enhances the traditional marriage institution by weakening women’s chances of survival after a divorce through constrictions of entitlement to real estates and other assets.⁴⁵ The new political economic discourse which became intertwined with class and gender created a new power structure. Post-socialist state discourse along with market forces and patriarchal values backed by Confucian rhetoric resulted in a ‘marriage market’ that is gendered and institutionalizes women’s sexuality as means to economic security.⁴⁶

Hence, despite the transformations and new liberal concepts entering Chinese society, the construction of gender roles in which men are assigned active and sexually aggressive roles whereas women are seen as passive, obedient, selfless, and living to serve their duties to the nation and family seem to remain prevalent. In this context, Wu and Dong (2019) define two strands of Chinese feminism, which disrupt this hegemony in their own ways. The ‘entrepreneurial strand’ encourages women to profit from the marriage market in their own terms. It argues that women should abandon their traditional wifely duties and manners such as being submissive and self-sacrificial, and instead exert their autonomy to gain personal returns. Women achieve power by capitalizing their sexuality, performing according to the rhetoric of traditional femininity and domesticity. It suggests that to get married with high status ‘elite men’ and for achieving economic security, they need to ‘perform’ and act like an embodiment of conventional feminine and domestic woman while in reality disregarding the traditional duties that are expected from such a wife. This strand of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

feminism prioritizes women's personal gains and profits in a patriarchal, hierarchical, and consumerist society, even if they are gained by re-enforcing "the traditional and patriarchal expectations from women and enhancing masculinity based on both economic and sexual dominance."⁴⁷ Hence, while they manipulate the current order by 'putting on a performance' in accordance with the gendered expectations of society, they gain financial security and a comfortable life where they refuse to actually perform the traditional duties expected of them. In doing so, they also foster this system of hegemonic family values further, in order to exploit it.

'The non-cooperative strand' encourages the exact opposite logic of the entrepreneurial strand. According to non-cooperative feminists, economic gain is not an end in itself but rather 'personal economic standing' is what makes sexual autonomy for women possible in a society that one's social status and standing is defined by their power of consumption. Hence, non-cooperative feminists do not regard economic gains as an end in itself which can be obtained through marriage or in return of a service to men, but rather as a tool to gain independence in order to exist and survive in this new and modern society. As stated by a reader of the feminist media outlet "Feminist Voices": "An independent life requires economic independence. Having a voice requires having money."⁴⁸ The non-cooperative strand thus, argues for the empowerment of women by denouncing the sexualization of women for the marketized marital institution⁴⁹ and through pursuing higher education and reputable careers.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11.

As Banet-Weiser (2018) states, it is true that “when the feminist movement becomes visibly powerful, the misogynist response becomes stronger”⁵⁰ in return. Anti-feminist backlash and online misogyny on the internet emerge as inevitable challenges for women not only in China but all around the world in recent years.⁵¹ I believe that the ways anti-feminism is triggered and manifested can differ in some ways in accordance with the dynamics of a nation. However, in the case of China and Korea they follow similar veins. In the Chinese context, men blame women as the reason they cannot perform the new masculinity that has emerged with the new neoliberal capitalist order. In this new order, masculinity is defined by wealth, actions that suggest wealth, and a higher class standing such as having a “second wife”⁵² or being able to afford buying sex work ideally from white collar successful Chinese women as a status symbol. The economic inequality along with inequalities between classes makes performing the ‘new masculinity,’ which is demonstrated through “economic success and possession of female sexuality,”⁵³ and defined by the power to purchase, extremely hard for average men. Hence, the real reason for men feeling insufficient or being unable to show masculinity lies in the economic inequality among classes in China. However, grievances and protests about class inequality pose a threat to the hegemony of the ruling elite. Hence, the root issue is rendered unrecognizable by the elite class and the indignant subjects displace their discontent on to women who they consider to be transgressing the gender order by utilizing and manipulating the system itself. This order which sexualizes women and

⁵⁰ Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*. In Kim, “The Resurgence and Popularization of Feminism in South Korea,” 81.

⁵¹ Huang, “Anti-Feminism,” 3584.

⁵² The concept of second wife is defined as: “The first tier, *ernai* (“second wife”), is akin to a mistress. She is usually provided with an apartment, an income, and gifts in return for sex, companionship, and sometimes wifely domestic services.” in Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,” 16.

⁵³ Wu and Dong, “What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?” 16.

regards them as commodities over which power and masculinity can be exercised is also extremely patriarchal hence, even a man from the 'lowest-class' is still considered above from any woman. In this unfair system women either utilize and manipulate it or they defy the system altogether, refusing to participate by not marrying and achieving academic or career success instead of performing domestic duties that serve their husband and household. In Wu and Dong (2019)'s context of Chinese feminism, Chinese men seem to be "criticizing non-cooperative [feminists] in the image of [their] entrepreneurial counterpart"⁵⁴ by blaming them for abandoning traditional gender norms and becoming tools for serving as sexual resources for elite men to strengthen their masculinity. Directly confronting non-cooperative successful, and highly achieved women would bring a sense of emasculation and class awareness hence by consubstantiating the two strands of feminist behavior into one, men channel their suppressed class antagonism under the guise of female transgressions.⁵⁵

Hence, women, especially feminist women, are blamed for the anxiety men suffer from not being able to perform according to the ways of hegemonic masculinity in Chinese context. They perceive women's actions as hegemonic displacement. By hegemonic displacement it is meant that when women become more articulate in expressing the problems they face, take actions to bring attention to these unjust practices of society and devise courses of actions to fight and resist against them, men feel threatened that they are losing their place of privilege in society to women. Women, who choose elite men who can provide for them or women who refuse to enter the marriage market and perform traditional wifely duties altogether, women who focus on their careers rather than starting a family threaten

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 16.

the traditional Confucian concept of men being the leader of the family, breadwinners to be obeyed and revered. With families' involvement getting lesser in their children's marriage and freedom of choice creating competition among men, the ones who do not possess prospects to attract a wife or a romantic partner, who cannot perform the new way of masculinity which demands possessing the power to consume are not being chosen. As a result, these men feel inferior, they feel their position in society is threatened, and they are not respected or coddled just for being men. However, instead of the consumerist and capitalistic system their anger and anxiety is directed at women.

The new societal order defining masculinity and social standing through power of purchase and wealth brought by open-market economy requires men to perform their masculinity in a new way and only allows them to rise in social standing by engaging these new values. However, the discourses of family, gender, and sexuality which are still heavily influenced by Confucian hierarchical patriarchal system is disrupted when the values cannot be practiced in reality for some men. Thus, the system cannot provide the privilege that is promised to men. Therefore, being unable to benefit from these privileges that they feel entitled to by the traditional values, create anxiety in men. In turn they try to "get their revenge" from women by abusing them online. According to Huang (2023), they employ four strategies in doing so: "identifying feminists as deviant women" by portraying them unlikeable by men or not being a real woman, "identifying feminists as betraying the nation" by accusing them embracing foreign/Western ideologies, worshipping Western men, being enemies of Chinese nation, Chinese values, and Chinese men, "identifying feminists as connected to Islamists"⁵⁶ by linking feminist women with Islam and using

⁵⁶ The starting point for this seems to be the online support shown by Chinese feminists to a female Muslim student who had refused to take off her hijab during a military training at a Guangzhou

Islamophobia to stir up panic and discontent towards feminists, and lastly “identifying feminists speaking online as fake-feminists” who do not fit their description of “real” feminists.⁵⁷ According to anti-feminist men, the real feminists contribute to society by doing progressive things for the Chinese nation such as being doctors, entrepreneurs etc. The “fake” feminists on the other hand, “are ‘ugly’ radicals who oppose national traditions, are in league with Western anti-China forces and Islamists, are only active on social media, and use the ‘feminist’ label to garner unearned advantages.”⁵⁸

This chapter has illustrated the societal, cultural, and moral background of China and the position of women in Chinese society. The next chapter will delve into Korean social discourse and how it is shaped in regards to Confucianism and religious thought.

college in 2014. It is argued online that by supporting the hijab the feminists surrender to the Islamic culture instead of liberating women from it. For further insight see Qiqi Huang, “Anti-Feminism: Four Strategies for the Demonisation and Depoliticisation of Feminism on Chinese Social Media,” *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 7 (October 2, 2022): 3583–89.

⁵⁷ Huang, “Anti-Feminism.”

⁵⁸ Huang, “Anti-Feminism,” 3594.

CHAPTER 3

KOREAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY: SOCIAL DISCOURSE AND CONFUCIANISM

During the *Joseon* period (1392-1910), Confucianism or rather neo-Confucianism was adopted as the state ideology by the ruling elite. This illustrates the Korean state's very early endeavor of establishing its hegemony by shaping the societal norms. Deuchler (1992) describes the pre-Confucian Korean society as a matrilineal society⁵⁹ in which strong social equality was evidenced by archaeological findings as well.⁶⁰ In this light, establishing a new ideology which accentuated a patriarchally gendered structure in society can be understood as a defense mechanism to subdue one part of the society while uplifting the other. During the previous *Silla* (668-935) and *Koryo* (918-1392) periods women seem to enjoy more freedom, moreover men and women were regarded in equal terms. It took a couple hundred years for state induced neo-Confucianist values to take root in Korean society. Now, however, Korea holds on to one of the strictest forms of Confucianism among other East Asian countries that were influenced by Confucian discourse.⁶¹

Confucianism implemented a strict hierarchical system of social relations⁶² and a kinship system based on “organized patrilineal lineage groups” which became a building stone of the Korean society.⁶³ This strict hierarchical order, division of duties, roles assigned according to gender, family and heteronormative marriage being promoted as a norm and as a duty expected to be performed by everyone meant

⁵⁹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*. In Hoffman, “Blurred Genders,” 126.

⁶⁰ Nelson, “The Status of Women in Ko-Shilla” in Hoffman, “Blurred Genders,” 126.

⁶¹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* in Choe, “Modernization, Gender Roles, and Marriage Behavior in South Korea,” 293.

⁶² Park and Cho, “Confucianism and the Korean Family,” 118.

⁶³ Manek, “Confucian Historical Narratives and Misogynic Culture in South Korea,” 8.

that women had strictly defined roles and duties that are assigned to them. They were defined and recognized only by their duties to men and their families rather than as free-willed individuals. In Confucian discourse women's conduct and chastity hold extreme value and importance. A woman is expected to show fidelity to her spouse and by extension her spouse's family as well, be filial, observe proper rituals in ancestor worshipping, be obedient to her father when she is a child, then to her husband when she is married, and then to her son if the husband passes away. Obedience is seen as a must in this context and defines a woman's value. The higher social class a woman belonged the more restricted she became during *Joseon* period. They had to uphold a certain social conduct dictated by Confucian ideals. These concepts carried on to modern Korean society to a certain degree as well, creating a strife between gender equality struggles of recent years and Confucian tradition. On this, Eunkang Koh (2008) argues that the male-dominated nature of Korean society cannot be seen as a result of Confucian teachings but rather "the supporters of male-domination who manipulated the interpretation of Confucian scripture."⁶⁴ She also argues Confucianism being compatible with gender equality and women's subordination to men as not being inherent to Confucian philosophy but something that was historically used to bolster the patriarchal hegemony.⁶⁵ She supports her claim by suggesting that Korean women today do not feel uncomfortable studying the Confucian classics which were once reserved only for men and if Confucianism were to portray women as inferiors to men and their subordination to men as natural, women would not be studying this subject.⁶⁶ Koh (2008)'s argument, hence, would

⁶⁴ Koh, "Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures," 361.

⁶⁵ For further insight on the discussion: Eunkang Koh, "Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71, no. 2 (June 2008): 345–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0041977x08000578>.

⁶⁶ Koh, "Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures," 355.

suggest that patriarchal hegemony in modern Korean society is not inherent to Confucian philosophy itself but rather the historical elite who utilized it for their agenda. I disagree with this argument because Confucianism did provide the grounds for ‘manipulation’ and ‘misuse’ for patriarchal discourse in the first place. Even though Confucianism may not be misogynistic in its essence, it has been interpreted in a manner that used to validate positioning women as obedient and subservient to their family and essentially to men. Now, it has been practiced for thousands of years as a tradition. The Confucianism people experience and practice, the Confucian traditions in their minds is the one that has shaped the Korean society as a patriarchal, conservative, and gendered society. In this light, does Confucianism not being ‘patriarchal in its essence’ make a substantial difference when in practice it does legitimize and promote this rhetoric? Koh (2008) states that the idea of women’s subordination to men is promoted by Confucian commentaries rather than the main scriptures themselves and that “it is necessary to distinguish Confucian philosophy from Confucian practices and scriptures.”⁶⁷ She introduces “female Confucian intellectuals” from *Joseon* dynasty who were aristocrats presupposing women’s subordination to men themselves and aimed to teach women how to behave properly and survive in the male dominated *Joseon* society. If something is ‘taken out of context’ and interpreted differently from its ideal or its essence by people, what difference does it make to separate the practice from the philosophy itself? Even though Koh (2008) herself does not provide any tangible examples in Confucian scriptures that does support or suggest gender-equality in terms of the period, even if we were to assume the intended purpose and meaning of the philosophy was not promoting a gendered hierarchy, would not the meaning of the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 355.

philosophy what people understood and interpreted it to be? These questions need further and a separate discussion to answer, however in the context of our discussion there seems to be not enough evidence to suggest Confucianism not promoting women's subordination to men let alone supporting gender-equality. I would argue that even though it may have been manipulated, Confucianism provided a basis for such interpretations and practices in the first place. Even the female intellectuals of the time presupposed that men and women were indeed different from each other, had different duties and roles in society, were not equal to each other, and tried to give enough tools to women for behaving properly and to gain as much power as they can "to secure their positions in the male-dominated society."⁶⁸ If men's domination is accepted, men and women are inherently regarded as different by their nature because of *Um and Yang*⁶⁹ philosophy, how does this tie with the supposed gender equality of Confucianism? Rather than their works being evidence to Confucianism's gender equality they can actually be interpreted as a way of survival for women who did not have much social rights by adopting the hegemonic ideology of Confucianism and try to find a place for themselves in their society. One of these intellectuals "suggests that women need education as much as men, she draws a clear line between male and female ways of achieving this," hence further illustrating the emphasis on the difference between men and women. Even though it was advocated that they should both receive education, men and women should not receive the same education. This brings back the expression "men and women are equals but women are less equal." Providing this argument which presupposes the difference hence inequality between men and women as an evidence for gender equality in Confucian context along with the suggestion that if Confucianism were to promote

⁶⁸ Ibid., 355.

⁶⁹ Yin-yang

subordination of women to men women would not be studying Confucianism, do not seem enough evidences to prove those points. There may not be full on passages that portray women as inferiors and naturally subordinate to men in Confucian scriptures, but this does not make the philosophy itself an ideology that suggests gender equality. In my opinion it can, at the very best, be a not-so-openly misogynist ideology. It is an important cultural building block with hundreds of years of tradition behind it that has shaped the Korean society for a long time. However, trying to reinterpret Confucianism in order to integrate the modern endeavor of gender equality would be futile and misleading. Not only there seems to be no concrete evidence suggesting this type of gender equal supportive interpretation in the scriptures themselves, for thousands of years scholars and peoples of different civilizations have built their own understanding, practices, traditions, and interpretations of this philosophy in a similar vein with regards to women's position in a society. Separating the practice from the idea does not erase the real life experiences of people in Korean (and Chinese) society under Confucian tradition. I would suggest that Confucian tradition that has been culminated by Korean people over hundreds of years is still prominent and constitutes an important part of Korean identity in regards to its conservative, patriarchal, and hierarchal tendencies.

Social harmony, conformity, and collectivity rather than individuality are emphasized in Korean way of life since Confucian philosophy promotes hierarchy and unity as a way to ensure the harmony and success of a nation. The relationships between a ruler and his subjects, parents and children, and husband and wife form the basis of society. Filial piety is expected of children and the oldest son benefit from the most privileges in a family. He also has a duty to observe and carry out ancestral rituals. The concept of marriage, especially during *Joseon* period, and

early into the Republic of Korea was seen as a way to unite two families in a most beneficial way for them. These unions were mostly arranged by parents of the couple and were decided based on the merits each family would provide for each other respectively. In a more modern context, parents chose a partner for their child based on the bride's virtues, chastity, her family's social standing, the groom's ability to provide for his family, his resources and his family's social standing. Until a decade or two ago women's primary roles were still commonly seen as homemaking and raising children.

The cultural/traditional inclination toward conservatism that were propagated in Korea by Confucianism is also supported by the existing religious landscape of Korea which consists of Shamanism, Buddhism, and recently Protestantism, and Catholicism.⁷⁰ Shamanism, a native religion to Korea, has 5000 years of history in the peninsula⁷¹ and it is one of the main components of 'Korean identity.' It has traditionally left the most powerful impact on religious and cultural thought of Korean society, Korean attitudes, behaviors, and cultural practices. According to Kim (2000), Shamanism catered to "this-worldly, materialistic, fatalistic, magical and even utilitarian tendencies of Koreans."⁷² Having such a strong hold on Korean people's psyche and cultural practices as well as religious culture, new religions had to "compromise with and absorb elements of Shamanism in order to be accepted."⁷³ Christian Protestantism in Korea, hence, adopted the practices of Shamanism, partly merging with it in order to appeal to the discourse of religion in people's minds. The

⁷⁰ Shin, "Communism and Capitalism, and Conservatism and Consumerism," 83.

⁷¹ According to National Statistical Office's 19th Population and Housing Census in 2015, 56.1% of the population did not belong to any religion whereas 19.7% belonged to Protestantism, 7.9% to Catholicism, and 15.5% to Buddhism. See Jaeshik Shin, "Communism and Capitalism, and Conservatism and Consumerism: Some Contexts and Contents of Korean Protestantism," *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology*, no. 28 (December 2017), 82.

⁷² Kim, "Korean Religious Culture and Its Affinity to Christianity," 119.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 119.

Shamanic world-view and this-worldly wish fulfillment in the form of material blessings by God were accentuated in Protestantism to make the new religion more acceptable when it was imported.⁷⁴

In Korean discourse, Protestantism is associated with modernization and social reform since Protestant missionaries from the US played a significant role in modernization of Korea through their missionary activities and programs. Thus, Christianity in this context was also associated with liberation from Japanese imperialism. Following the Korean War, theological and ideological conservatism of Korean Protestantism merged with anti-communist ideology through positive relations with the US. Protestant refugees from North Korea cemented these anti-communist and conservative tendencies both Korean cultural tradition and Korean Protestantism.⁷⁵

Korean religious and cultural thought has had materialistic and ‘this-worldly’ inclinations as demonstrated by Shamanism at the earliest. Shamanism aims to remedy the practical needs in life such as health, wealth, material wishes, male births, etc. for which the service of shamans is still being sought.⁷⁶ This inclination of materialism and ‘this-worldly’ essence created a suitable ground for anti-communist, consumerist, and conservative ideology which amalgamated into the new ‘gospel of prosperity.’ The notion of being materialistically rewarded by the grace of God and it being a symbol of God’s blessing was used to popularize Protestantism by the leaders of newly-established churches who were aware of the ‘this-worldly’ tendencies of Korean religious and cultural discourse. Protestant churches selectively endorsed Christian doctrines that are similar to shamanistic beliefs while also

⁷⁴ Ibid., 119.

⁷⁵ Shin, “Communism and Capitalism, and Conservatism and Consumerism,” 81.

⁷⁶ Kim, “Korean Religious Culture and Its Affinity to Christianity,” 119.

incorporating aspects of shamanistic rituals as well.⁷⁷ Thus, Protestantism got its footing from the already-existing discourse while at the same time furthering these tendencies. Although Protestantism is associated with modernization and liberalism as well as improving women's social standing in Korea, it still maintains a conservative outlook on women's rights compared to men. Korean Protestantism stressed the conservative features of Christianity in order to reconcile this imported religion with Korean culture. Protestant discourse was articulated rather seamlessly to the male-hegemonic conservative discourses of Buddhism and Confucianism which prescribe women's obedience to men, rendering the existence of gender inequality valid.⁷⁸ In this context, Korean Protestantism, Confucianism, Shamanism, and Buddhism form the religious and traditional sphere of Korean society which carries materialistic, 'this-worldly,' anti-communist, conservative, and consumerist undertones since they all have been shaped and curated for catering towards the fulfillment of materialistic wishes whether through spirits of Shamanism or *Hananim* 'God' of Christianity. These tendencies are also illustrated through the "business-oriented structure and operation" of Korean Protestant megachurches.⁷⁹ Subsequently, Western influence on Korean culture, rapid industrialization, economic developments, "Korean economy [being] absorbed into global capitalism"⁸⁰ as well as Protestant megachurches that promoted material success through the gospel of prosperity⁸¹ also fueled consumerist and anti-communist tendencies in Korean society which go hand in hand with conservatism. Yet, at the same time new notions such as struggle for gender equality, human rights as well as

⁷⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁷⁹ Shin, "Communism and Capitalism, and Conservatism and Consumerism," 99.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 105

⁸¹ Ibid., 107.

rights of women and LGBTQ+ people, sexual freedom are in interplay with Confucian-Protestant discourse which actively changes the level of hold these traditions have on Korean culture. In this context, while the conservative and patriarchal practices ensue and are still prevalent, a strong feminist movement, for example, has been on the rise for over a decade as a response to the inequalities and hardships women face in Korean society.

3.1. Modernization in Korean context, feminism, and anti-feminism discourses

Contemporary Korea presents an interesting fusion of traditional Confucian values, modernization endeavors, new consumerist capitalistic order, liberal notions that are introduced via interactions with the West, gender and feminist struggles, and democratic as well as authoritarian reflexes. In some spheres it is obvious that traditional Confucian and conservative values remain intact as illustrated by the still prevalent hierarchical relationships in work places, schools, and families, ‘the feminist reboot’ since 2015 as a response to rising misogynistic discourse online, and the patriarchal system that still favors men over women systematically.

The manner Korea was modernized that squeezed what other Western societies achieved in 200 years into 60 years, can be defined as ‘compressed.’⁸² The gradual modernization provided Western societies with ample time to adapt, syncretize, or abandon their old customs while Korean government-led rapid industrialization and modernization did not present the same opportunity to Korean society. The rapid modernization occurred without much regard for the traditions, everyday lives of ordinary people and ways to reconcile the influx of Western civilization. This does not mean Korean tradition or identity was erased or was not

⁸² Chang, “Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents,” in Yang, “Young Generation’s Perceptions of Same-Sex Sexuality,” 3.

preserved. As can be seen by the current *Hallyu* endeavor, Korean tradition and history are at the forefront in Korea's soft power agenda. However, only an idealized, beautified, marketable, and commodifiable version is presented and promoted. The change modernization brought about has not been able to entirely penetrate the deep levels of the psyche of Korean people, their mentality, sociocultural norms, folk traditions, customs, and way of life yet. Rather, it penetrated the materialistic aspects of everyday life for Korean people. While young Koreans encounter with notions of Western modernity such as "equality, human rights and respect [for] diversity" in family life they are still raised by Confucian ethics.⁸³ Hence, since Confucian tradition and Western modernity coexist, Korean people live amid contradictory beliefs and practices. Palley (1994) explains further that:

... while the material culture in South Korea modernized and been affected by Western influences, its behavioral culture maintains and embraces some Confucian traditions, and it is slow to change. Part of this behavioral culture is reflected in the inequities in women's roles.⁸⁴

In the Korean context rapid modernization, consumerist economy, the existing societal order, and new notions flooding from the West seem to parallel that of China's. In contemporary Korean society masculinity is defined through wealth and the power to purchase as well. However, with neoliberal policies increasing the wealth gap, "middle-class-based hegemonic masculinity"⁸⁵ has become harder to achieve. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice which ensures that the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. As Kim (1998) states: "if masculinity in contemporary Korea is measured by earning ability, poor men are by

⁸³ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁴ Palley, "Feminism in a Confucian Society," 274.

⁸⁵ Kim, "Misogyny for Male Solidarity," 163.

definition not masculine.”⁸⁶ Antagonized in the face of the discrepancies between privileged upbringings as precious sons and the realities of the society where if they do not possess the new cultural capital, which in this case is money/wealth, they are not chosen to be dated or married by women, they in turn blame the women who do not choose them instead of the system that creates that inequality itself. Just like China, the misogynistic discourse in Korea carries a nationalistic aspect as well. It seems that, as Jinsook Kim (2018) states in her article, women have been symbolized as the “cultural carriers” of ethnic groups and “the transmitters of its cultures.”⁸⁷ This idea ties well with Manek (2023)’s claim that misogynist Korean men believe Korean women humiliate the nation, and they, as men are “responsible for preserving the nation’s illustrious heritage.”⁸⁸ In this context men regard women as transmitters and carriers of culture hence their ‘Koreannes’ on top of their “nonconformist” behaviors to the traditional patriarchal order makes them twice as guilty. The *-nyeo/-nyeon* (girl, woman/bitch) discourse produced in male dominant online spaces against a particular type of women transforms into a social discourse in which Korean women as a whole are criticized and attacked. The term *Kimchi-nyeo/nyeon*, for example, first emerged in *Ilbe* which is a notorious far-right community in Korea. The term which coins *kimchi*, a traditional Korean food and *-nyeo/-nyeon* a derogatory way of address for women, is frequently used as a tool for hate speech and to attack Korean women as a group. This term and the way it is used creates a misogynistic social discourse.⁸⁹

The internet and anonymity that it provides, along with the social problems mentioned above saw the proliferation of online misogyny, the “anti-feminist” and

⁸⁶ Kim, “Men’s Talk,” in Kim, “Misogyny for Male Solidarity,” 163.

⁸⁷ Yuval-Davis and Anthias, *Woman-Nation-State*, in Kim, “Misogyny for Male Solidarity,” 158.

⁸⁸ Manek, “Confucian Historical Narratives and Misogynic Culture in South Korea,” 56.

⁸⁹ Kim, “Misogyny for Male Solidarity,” 156-159.

incel⁹⁰ movements by young Korean men. The rise of misogyny and the problems Korean women face under the highly patriarchal society in turn, led women to be more vocal about the injustices they face and the feminist movement to gain momentum. While women are still expected to manage their households and families by performing unpaid housework/domestic labor, they are also expected to work outside of the home as well, since in recent decades it has almost become impossible for a family to get by with only one income. However, when women join the work force, they do not get paid as much as men, because of traditional Confucian values that do not consider them equal to men and the stigmatization that they are going to leave the work once they get married or have children hence, they struggle to get positions which will allow them to be promoted and rise in hierarchy, or worse they are not hired at all.

Sexual violence, nonconsensual videos of women being taken and distributed, access to abortion, oppressive ideals of beauty, and discrimination in the labor market are the shared problems of Korean feminists. Mid-2010s Korea saw what is referred in academia as “feminist reboot.”⁹¹ In the Korean context this reboot can be associated with both effects of the opposition to misogyny by transnational feminist activism had on Korean women and a far-right online community called *Ilbe* which has created various hate discourses and trolling culture against women. In 2015, feminist activists created the online platform *Megalia* almost as an antithesis of *Ilbe*, in which they challenged the misogyny created and spread by *Ilbe* members, by

⁹⁰ Short for ‘involuntary celibate,’ a term related to the online subculture of heterosexual males who define themselves as unable to find sexual and romantic partners despite their desire to have relationships with women. They in turn blame and villainize women for not choosing them. Incels can be from any race and background.

⁹¹ Sohn, *Peminijeum ributeu*, in Kim, “The Resurgence and Popularization of Feminism in South Korea,” 76.

“mirroring” the hate speech produced by men to turn the misogynistic discourse back on itself.”⁹²

Korean feminism utilizes online communities, social platforms as means to produce a feminist discourse, fight with misogyny through online activism but they also organize offline protests and take actions outside of the cyberspace. One section of Korean feminists, which self-identifies as *raetpem* “radical feminists,” takes biological sex as the definition of the subject of feminism and follows female-first policies. Radical feminists exclude social minorities from their movement to focus on biological women solely. They are the originators of the 4B movement that emerged between 2017 and 2019 which promotes “not having sex with men,” “not giving birth,” “not dating men,” and “not marrying men.”

This chapter has illustrated the current social and cultural norms of Korea in relation with its history with Confucianism. The argument of Confucianism supporting gender equality is debated and argued against, the religious landscape of the nation, which cements the conservative and anti-communist tendencies with its materialistic, ‘this-worldly,’ and consumerist undertones, is investigated and illustrated. The current situation of Korean women and their struggles in modern-day Korean society, in relation with the rising anti-feminist discourse, is demonstrated. On this, women’s reactions toward such discourse is briefly discussed as well. The next chapter will explore the emergence of the genre Boys Love and its journey toward China and Korea.

⁹² Ibid., 76.

CHAPTER 4
BL'S JOURNEY:
FROM JAPAN TO CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA

Boys Love (BL from here onwards) depicts male-male romantic and sexual relationships and it has emerged during 1970s in Japan. This description is the most generic and widely known description of BL genre. On the surface level, this may seem as succinct and an adequate definition, yet it would be both misleading and an oversimplification to leave it at that. In its essence BL does depict male-male erotic/sexual and romantic relationships and it is by and for women. However, when we get past the surface level, we can recognize the intricacies of the genre itself.

Since the genre illustrates romantic and sexual relationships between men hence having 'queer subjects' it may seem logical to assume BL as a genre of queer literature to which I argue against in the coming chapters. According to Suzuki (2015), there is a clear distinction between queer literature and "female-oriented male-male love fiction written by female authors"⁹³ in the context of Japan. Suzuki argues that the distinction between the two can be seen from the themes chosen, writing styles, narrative structures, and their respective readership.

More crucially, despite its focus on romance and sexual relationships between men, Japanese BL's aim is not depicting the lives of homosexual men or their relationships.⁹⁴ Most of the protagonists in BL do not identify themselves as homosexual but just boys/men who just happen to be attracted to or fall in love with another boy/man. They do not identify as homosexuals. Most of the time sexual orientations are not acknowledged as a concept or presented as something that has

⁹³ Suzuki, "What Can We Learn from Japanese Professional BL Writers?" 93.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 93.

any place or effect on the fictional world of BL. This is also true for BL in China and South Korea. Hence, the question of whether BL can be considered as queer literature is important and can be discussed further by other studies in an in-depth manner.

The emergence of Boys Love is often dated back to 1970s' Japan. However, to be able to understand and discuss BL, first, we should identify what BL is and what it entails in regards to other genres/subgenres that depicts 'male-male romantic and sexual relationships.' Also having a grasp of the evolution of works resulting in what we now call BL that has spread to Korea and China is also important. This section will briefly discuss the emergence of manga and novels depicting love between men and move on to differentiate between four different subgenres that have emerged in Japan.

4.1 Emergence of BL

As Welker (2015) illustrates, *shōjo* manga has a significant place in the history and evolution of BL.⁹⁵ In 1970s *shōjo* manga, which was catered towards young girls and women, started to emerge as a distinct category. During this time *shōjo* manga came to possess novelistic elements and include "the internal psychology of female characters"⁹⁶ which rendered the category more interesting and something women can relate to. However, at this point *shōjo* manga was a genre which was still being produced predominantly by men. When a new up-and-coming generation of women started to produce *shōjo* works the scene had changed in a substantial way. This new generation of women were called the Fabulous Year 24 Group.⁹⁷ This group is also

⁹⁵ Welker, "A Brief History of Shōnen'ai, Yaoi, and Boys Love."

⁹⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁷ They were born around the year Showa 24, or 1949.

referred to as “the Fabulous Forty-Niners.”⁹⁸ They continued to project the inner thoughts and feelings of their characters which fleshed them out and made them more complex instead of superficial and cartoonish. Along with more realistic characters, themes came to be more diverse and sophisticated while the narratives also got more advanced.⁹⁹ What is of interest here is the development of a new genre of *shōjo* manga by the Forty-Niners, namely: *shōnen'ai*. *Shōnen'ai* depicted the love and sexual relationships between beautiful boys or older, influential, rich, and handsome men/beautiful boys. *Shōnen'ai* stories were printed in *shōjo* manga magazines which absolutely played a crucial role in spreading narratives about love stories between two boys and paving the way for what will become BL. However, it would not be exactly correct to give all the credit to *shōnen'ai* when explaining the interest among women towards love between men.

According to McLelland and Welker (2015), the tradition of appreciating the beauty of male youth in Japanese culture reaches all the way to the *Heian* period (794-1185). The famous novel Tale of Genji (*Genji Monogatari*) by Murasaki Shikibu presents one of the earliest examples of a female author celebrating and appreciating the charms of young men.¹⁰⁰ Another example would be “tales about beautiful boy acolytes” (*Chigo Monogatari*) by Buddhist priests which again describe the love story between Buddhist monks and young novices.¹⁰¹ As a literary tradition, homosexual love between an older man and a younger man/boy can be traced back to the *Edo* period (1603-1868).¹⁰² Many high-status individuals from *shoguns* to wealthy personages practiced male-male romantic relationships during

⁹⁸ McLelland and Welker, “An Introduction to ‘Boys Love’ in Japan,” 9.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰² Ibid., 6.

the era until the *Meiji* period (1868-1912).¹⁰³ The long years of producing stories depicting relationships and love between men, culminated into a literary tradition, namely, *nanshoku*, and also an affinity with the genre in the society. The genre was an outlet where appreciation of youth and love towards youths turned into a cultural ideal, which to this day holds an important place in Japanese culture actually. I think that compared to other nations most of which at some point at their history produced literary works on male-male sexual relationships and romance, what makes Japan unique and the country that originated the BL genre is the continuity of this tradition in the public sphere. What I mean by that may be better illustrated through an example: Ottoman Empire is known to have produced some overt, some allegorical literary works about male-male romance¹⁰⁴ but at some point, like Japan, this tradition in literature was pushed to the sidelines. This does not mean that works that focus on male-male love and romance ceased to exist but rather they went further underground and became niche, away from the public eye only to be accessed by those in the community or be found by digging around a little. Japan, unlike Ottoman Empire/modern-day Turkey, brought the genre back from periphery to the center and made it visible not only to Japanese public but to the world as well. According to McLelland and Welker (2015), by the late *Meiji* period homosexuality became something that was pathologized and was considered as out of the norm.¹⁰⁵ Even though from some aspects the *Meiji* restoration can be seen as a disengagement from tradition in the name of modernization and Westernization, when observed closely it is evident that a complete break from the old ways did not happen in certain areas of life and culture of Japanese society. It is important to note that, in its endeavor to

¹⁰³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁴ For further insight: Murray, "Homosexuality in the Ottoman Empire," and Schick, "Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Ottoman and Turkish Erotic Literature."

¹⁰⁵ McLelland and Welker, "An Introduction to 'Boys Love' in Japan," 6.

modernize and ‘catch-up’ with the Western nations in terms of science, technology and becoming a modern empire like the US, Japan also adopted certain qualities it believed that created a modern nation and society. In turn, following Western notions of the time, heterosexuality in romance and sexuality had become the hegemonic view on relationships between people and representations in literature and art. Male homoeroticism, thus became a minor theme in a flourishing modern literature, not completely disappearing, however. As I mentioned above, I believe the tradition of love between males and ‘love of youth’ is revived rather than being created anew. Of course, this time the genre brought to life by women and not men. In this aspect, Japanese women conquered and reclaimed a space in literature for themselves. In my opinion, the fact that an existing tradition was able to be revived indicates how deeply the tradition is rooted compared to modern day Turkey for example.¹⁰⁶

In the period following *Meiji* modernization, due to the increasing number of girls’ magazines whereby young women and girls were able to express themselves, share and engage with their interests which they could not satisfy through mainstream published literature, provided a space for the interest in male homosexuality in literature to flourish, which can be traced back to as early as 1950s and to articles from these magazines. The following decade, the 1960s, saw Mori Mari’s novellas on love between men which can be included in BL’s journey in Japan as one of the starting points.¹⁰⁷ By the late 1960s, *shōjo* manga narratives which focused on the love between two males started to change the *shōjo* manga scene radically: Protagonists were now male and they were being eroticized for the female

¹⁰⁶ In the case of modern day Turkey, there are different things to take into consideration, of course. The religious environment, policies of the government censorship and persecution of people who do not obey the hegemonic authority.

¹⁰⁷ Welker, “A Brief History of Shōnen’ai, Yaoi, and Boys Love,” 45.

gaze which was groundbreaking for the genre.¹⁰⁸ Initial works of *shōnen 'ai* characteristically featured young European boys in European settings, i.e. boarding schools or big European style mansions. This inclination towards choosing European settings and characters were not opted that heavily in the following works of the late 1970s and 1980s. The use of male characters instead of females, the homosexual nature of the relationships that are depicted, and the foreign settings in *shōnen 'ai* works were argued to provide the primary consumers of the genre, namely the demographic which consisted of adolescent girls to young women, with the means of escaping gender and sexual norms and restrictions of the period that were and are still being imposed on them. This view is a heavily discussed notion in BL academia which will also be discussed in the coming sections here.

4.2 *Shōnen 'ai*/Yaoi/ Boys Love/JUNE/*Tanbi*

In the Japanese context literary and artistic works that concern with love and romance between two men can be categorized into five groups: “*Shōnen 'ai*, *Yaoi*, JUNE, *Tanbi*, and Boys Love (BL).” Even though these terms can be/are used interchangeably most of the time, it would be beneficial for our discussion to try and differentiate between them as much as possible to understand the evolution of BL and what is meant by the term BL in the context of our discussion here. Suzuki (2015)¹⁰⁹ illustrates the differences among the ‘categories’ of BL through the interviews she conducts with professional BL authors/creators and their understanding of the classification within Japanese BL scene. According to Suzuki (2015), each term have been adopted to refer to a different genre of male-male romance fiction.

¹⁰⁸ *Shōnen 'ai* was still seen as a subgenre of *shōjo*.

¹⁰⁹ Kazuko Suzuki, “What Can We Learn from Japanese Professional BL Writers?” 93-118.

As it was briefly touched upon previously, *shōnen'ai* which first appeared as a subgenre of *shōjo* manga during the era of Fabulous Forty-Niners is the first group of works that had emerged in this genre. Forty-Niners were influenced by Western authors and artists as well as Japanese ones in their world-building and aesthetics. The very first works of *shōnen'ai* depicted relationships between adult men and adolescent boys, or between adolescent boys. Boarding schools were chosen as main locations for their works while stories themselves often had a melancholic ambiance to them.¹¹⁰

The second category, *tanbi*, refers to works of “high culture and pure literature.” *Tanbi* can be seen as a result of the Aestheticism movement in Japan. Aestheticism movement emerged in late 19th century Europe which argued that “art exists for the sake of its beauty not for any political or didactic purpose.”¹¹¹ During the late *Meiji* period writers such as Mori Ōgai and Ueda Bin introduced Aestheticism movement to Japan which was continued by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Nagai Kafū later on. However, when the Japanese literary tradition and the themes chosen in literary works by Japanese people throughout the ages are taken into consideration the importance Japanese people already bestowed upon beauty and youth can be clearly seen. Hence, in connection with their already existing aestheticism and passion for beauty, this movement was adopted quickly and realized itself in the Japanese artistic and literary spheres. In its core, then, *tanbi* is all about appreciating beauty hence, it does not need to necessarily depict male-male relationships.

In regards with the context of male-male relationships, works that are concerned with beauty whether through the atmosphere they create, the literary

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 96, 99.

¹¹¹ Aestheticism,” Encyclopedia Britannica.

language they use, the subjects they present or the feelings they evoke are considered as *tanbi*. The main concern is not the relationship between two men but rather the beauty of it, the beauty of the feeling of love, the agony that is suffered by the lovers, the beauty of the romance shared by them, or the beauty of time period and place that the story takes place. Compared to BL which is regarded as an entertainment and a product for and of mass culture, *tanbi*'s purpose is to appreciate the beauty through "pure literature" rather than cater to any other concerns. Suzuki (2015) captures the essence of *tanbi* and how it is perceived by Japanese professional BL writers in the background of Aestheticism, Japanese cultural and literary sphere, and the context of male-male romance. According to Suzuki (2015)'s interviews and the data she had gathered, *tanbi*, as a regular term does not invoke solely the meaning of love between men. In the context of male-male love, however, it refers to works that hold more literary value compared to others in the genre. Finally, *tanbi* has to have protagonists who are beautiful, stories should have a decadent and melancholic atmosphere with bittersweet endings without an obvious happy outcome.¹¹²

Another group in Japanese male-male love literary sphere is called JUNE. This style gets its name from the magazine JUNE. The magazine published works which carried concepts of *tanbi* while also being entertainment-driven as well. It is regarded as something "between literature and pornography" which appealed to girls who came to acknowledge their eros with the *shōnen'ai* genre.¹¹³ The genre places great importance on literary qualities but it is also different in that it places value on

¹¹² It is also important to point out that BL in China is called "*danmei*" as well, and it is an adaptation from the Japanese word *tanbi* carrying the core qualities of the genre. *Danmei* in China has been diversified significantly in recent years, however, it still holds that *danmei* works carry high literary value and even though the writers try to profit from their works despite PRC's harsh censorship laws, it does not seem like their main purpose is to commercialize their work unlike the creators of BL genre from Korea.

¹¹³ Toshihiko Sagawa, interview in Hitoshi, "'Hottoite kudasai' to iu hyōmei o megutte," in Suzuki, "What Can We Learn from Japanese Professional BL Writers?" 104.

its entertainment side as well. In the minds of modern BL creators of Japan, JUNE is associated with tragic and unhappy outcomes which delves into forbidden and immoral love as a subject, socially unacceptable relationships being its main theme. It is also regarded as the foundation of contemporary BL in the sense that JUNE brought beautiful and artistic writing of *tanbi* fusing it with the topic of male-male romance, then bringing a commercial aspect to it which included the entertainment of fans in the process as well. By many contemporary BL writers in Japan JUNE is seen as an older version of BL.¹¹⁴

The term *yaoi*, first used by amateur self-published writers to refer their works which lacked a concrete plot and narrative, and was rather dedicated to depict the spicy sex between men. The word itself is an acronym for *yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi* “no climax, no point, no meaning.”¹¹⁵ *Yaoi* draws characters and settings from conventional anime, manga, and novels pairing, or “coupling” according to the terminology, the characters in lines of certain tropes. It could be said that *yaoi*’s roots come from fan behavior that needs to externalize the thrill enjoyed from an original work and satisfying the desires while realizing the love they harbor toward it. Hence, as a category it was a rather amateur and fun endeavor that creators often self-indulged and self-published their works. One major contribution and innovation brought by *yaoi* was the concept of coupling. Coupling in this context dictates the sexual positioning of the main couple namely *seme* “top, attacker” and *uke* “bottom, receiver.”¹¹⁶

According to Suzuki (2015), *shōnen’ai*-JUNE and *yaoi*-BL can be differentiated by their stylistic components. She positions *yaoi*’s narrative structure

¹¹⁴ Suzuki, “What Can We Learn from Japanese Professional BL Writers?” 104.

¹¹⁵ Welker, “A Brief History of Shōnen’ai, Yaoi, and Boys Love,” 55.

¹¹⁶ This framework is adopted into Chinese *danmei* sphere as *gong* “seme/top” and *shou* “uke/bottom” and into Korean BL works as *gong* “seme/top” and *su* “uke/bottom.”

and methods as an important milestone in the genre of male-male romance fiction. Adapting the *seme-uke* framework for example, separates *yaoi* and BL from the earlier works of *shōnen'ai* and JUNE which did not show much rigidity in sexual positioning of their characters while for *yaoi* and BL it is an established framework. BL has inherited the *seme-uke* framework from *yaoi* while developing its own specific rules such as the principal of 'one stick one hole' dictating the necessity of the couple being monogamous.¹¹⁷ Another aspect of BL that separates it from other subgenres is the expectation of a happy ending unlike tragedy being a trademark for JUNE style. BL also denotes publications with commercial aims produced for entertainment purposes. In the context of Japan, maybe because it is a more commercially-driven genre, fans, thus the publishing houses, expect writers to follow the established rules exemplified above.

The demonstration of the categories under the genre of works that depict love between men shows that using BL as a general term to refer to body of works concerning male-male romance fiction by and for women would be more appropriate in our discussion regarding China and Korea since it has become a more general term for this genre. Also, it is understood to refer to works that are more recent. Content wise there are certain principals that are established and abided by Korean and Chinese works while platformization in these countries commodifies the works as well as the entertainment of fans.

4.3 BL in China

As early as the late-1970s Taiwanese fans, who were already interested in Japanese manga and animation, welcomed BL works and culture.¹¹⁸ Taiwan's not-so-strict

¹¹⁷ Suzuki, "What Can We Learn from Japanese Professional BL Writers?" 107.

¹¹⁸ Welker, "Introduction: Boys Love (BL) Media and Its Asian Transfigurations," 5.

attitude towards censoring pirated Japanese BL content enabled Taiwanese fans to access more BL resources than other East Asian countries. By the 1990s Hong Kong, witnessing the spreading of BL via Taiwan, in turn facilitated BL's expansion to mainland China. Hence, with pirated Japanese BL manga from Taiwan and Hong Kong crossing over to China, Chinese *danmei* culture emerged.¹¹⁹

Original *danmei* fiction in China started to emerge during the first half of 2000s which were modelled after Japanese BL works by using the same tropes such as strong *seme* and weak *uke* also the concepts such as rape being deployed as a plot device.¹²⁰ In the early days of *danmei* Japanese influence was rather heavy on the works that are produced by Chinese creators. Rape was a prevalent narrative in those works while sex scenes themselves were infused with the sense of sin and shame reflecting "the societal taboo on homosexuality and the guilt of women creators and fans stemming from expressing sexual feelings and consuming pornographic materials."¹²¹ What is also interesting is that slash fanfictions, Western works that depict romantic and sexual relationships between men from original literary works or media, have influenced Chinese *danmei* through the works produced for the popular TV series such as BBC's *Sherlock* (2017-2017) and The CW's *Supernatural* (2005-2020) as well. Hence, *danmei* is a hybrid of different influences and styles as well as an inclusive domain for content from different cultures.

In recent years Chinese *danmei* has endeavored to put *seme* and *uke* on equal footing instead of reenacting heteronormative gender norms in which being strong and active is associated with masculinity while being passive and obedient is

¹¹⁹ Lin, "Breaking the Structural Silence," 39.

¹²⁰ Xu and Yang, "Between BL and Slash," 24.

¹²¹ Ibid., 24.

associated with femininity.¹²² The relationship between the main couple is now being presented as a partnership between two equals who respect and trust each other rather than a dynamic with the same power imbalance that is seen in heteronormative couples in fiction and in real life. The redistribution of power between the couple, rape as a narrative being abandoned, sex scenes no longer symbolizing a sense of shame show that *danmei*, in time, evolved to portray a more egalitarian partnership than the traditional heterosexual romance.¹²³

In China, due to government surveillance and social backlash, BL has flourished through online publications more than offline publications. Also, it is relatively easier to evade government scrutiny in online platforms compared to published works. Online websites such as Jinjiang Literature City provides authors with a chance to commercialize their works. However, publishing BL work in websites like Jinjiang has its challenges since the site forces self-censoring as well as implements tools to report any content that seems to violate the rules the government set. Not-depicting overtly romantic and sexual relations between men is heavily indoctrinated both by government's disciplining and surveillance and also by the site's admins. Another downside for this easy-reporting mechanism is that it is open for manipulation in the sense that anyone can report anyone and any content on baseless grounds since a complaint is not required to be proven correct or be justified for it to get investigated.¹²⁴ Once it is reported, a complaint must be investigated, and any mistake can lead up to being punished by fines or being sent to prison.

¹²² Same inclination, although not as strong, can be observed in Japanese and Korean BL works where both *seme* and *uke* may both possess feminine traits, also presenting in a more feminine way or the other way around with masculine traits. However, this does not mean the previous tropes and characterization of *seme* and *uke*, repeating heteronormative gender norms are abandoned altogether in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese BL contents.

¹²³ Lin, "Breaking the Structural Silence," 35.

¹²⁴ Zhang, "Boys' Love in the Chinese Platformization of Cultural Production." and Bai, "Regulation of Pornography and Criminalization of BL Readers and Authors."

In China it is forbidden by law to publish obscene materials or gain profit from them hence, *danmei* authors legally cannot publish their works offline and monetize their content.¹²⁵ When some creators self-published and faced prison time or high fines, online sites which allowed these contents to be published and profited from has become even more preferable. Thanks to internet and fans who translated BL works to English, Chinese *danmei* has spread globally.¹²⁶ It gained attention both from international BL fans and from western publishers, who realized the interest Chinese *danmei* gathers and the potential it had, and thus has started to publish *danmei* novels in English. Before Western interest, Taiwan has been there to assist fans and creators from mainland China in their BL endeavors. In the face of censorship and punishments enforced by the government, “the publishers in Taiwan have stepped in to publish unabridged, popular *danmei* novels” and have assisted in distributing *danmei* books to sinophone areas such as Hong Kong, Macau, and Singapore.¹²⁷

Chinese government imposes its control through bans, enforcing censorship, and the anti-pornography law which enables punishment to those who challenge the state’s hegemony. These actions by the government naturally affect the content of *danmei*. Some authors self-censor and exclude any depictions of sex and intimacy between men, use tactics to circumvent the censorship in their prose, or solely write in a way that is referred in the fandom as “pure love/clear water,” depicting

¹²⁵ Tian, “More than Conformity or Resistance,” 190.

¹²⁶ The globalization of BL cannot be attributed to one single branch (i.e. China, Korea, or Japan) but rather all three contributed to it through stages. Japan gathered the initial global interest through *yaoi manga* which have been heavily circulated and translated to English, while Korean BL added on to the popularity of *yaoi manga* with its BL webtoons which are easy to read and access from smartphones, also providing official English translations, Chinese *danmei* novels with their high literary value, advanced world-building and intricate plots gathered interest from both the western publishing houses and fans. Hence, they all contributed towards the globalization of BL together in stages, sometimes even simultaneously.

¹²⁷ Lin, “Breaking the Structural Silence,” 39.

relationships in an extremely vague homosocial/homoromantic manner which most of the time can go under the radar as brotherhood between comrades. The Chinese government in this context seems to be assuming the role of ruler/father in Confucian tradition by regulating the society in order to “protect” the social harmony and unity of the nation, in reality solidifying its cultural ideological hegemony.

It is also important to keep the restrictions of examining Chinese *danmei* as a foreigner from outside in mind. The discussion regarding to China and *danmei* is based on what is translated and promoted and marketed towards the west of China and to the English speaking world. This limitation presents many questions that can be inquired in future studies. In the Chinese context, BL is produced heavily through written text rather than in visual form such as web comics/*manhwa*¹²⁸/webtoon like Korea. As it was mentioned before, it stems partly in an effort for evading censorship laws. Hence, the popularization of Chinese *danmei* relies heavily on the translation of these works since unlike Korean webtoons whose content can be understood to a certain extent through visuals without translation, *danmei* would remain fully domestic without translation. This brings the Chinese diaspora from English speaking countries into the equation. Initially, fans from diaspora or fans who speak Chinese and English translated the works by themselves in an amateurish endeavor. Hence, their preferences on what to translate, thus, to promote heavily shaped the *danmei* community outside of China. Most of the early translations carry explanations of the concepts and tropes from Chinese culture that are being utilized in the original works, opening a window for promoting the Chinese culture internationally as well. Through their selections Chinese *danmei* gained recognition and popularity. Among their selections some, usually extreme works that carry shock

¹²⁸ Korean word for the Japanese manga style comics, *manhua* in Chinese.

value in terms of extreme sexual acts and taboo concepts, has gathered more attention while some of them has remained in the background. The tropes that gained attention attracted western publishers as well when they sought works to license and publish hence, these works became even more visible and popular. Thus, the tropes that are popular and gain attention outside of China may very well be different from what is popular and demanded in China. This discussion is based on the works that are available to the English speaking community outside of China whose selection and promotion to outside being heavily influenced and shaped by people who translated and introduced them in the first place.

4.4 BL in South Korea

Korea was already familiar with male-male romance literature from Japan upon which it had formed its own fandom which dates back to the late 1980s. Korea's first commercial BL *manhwa* emerged in 1990s thanks to the development of internet which has also facilitated the distribution of Japanese as well as local BLs, and the formation of BL communities.¹²⁹ While 1990s was an important decade for BL in South Korea it was also during this decade that Youth Protection Act was enacted in order to punish anything that was deemed harmful for the youth, depicting homosexuality positively, for example, was considered such an act. As a result, online and offline BL works were restricted until 2004 when National Human Rights Commission of Korea advised homosexuality to be removed from the list of harmful media content.¹³⁰

Until the mid-2000s BL culture was rather a niche subculture in Korea. The first BL webtoon emerged as early as 2006, which radically changed the future of BL

¹²⁹ Kwon, "The Commercialization and Popularization of Boys Love in South Korea," 82.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 83.

in Korea. The success of Yoo Hachin's 'Perfectly Captivated' opened up a whole new market for online *manhwa* platforms and publishers.¹³¹ It revealed the potential BL and adult content in general possessed in gathering attention from female fans who were extremely devoted to the content they enjoyed. Hence, they were willing to pay to access the content since initially, BL content was scarce elsewhere.¹³² Park (2017) as cited in Kwon (2022) argues that Lezhin Comics was the initiator in establishing the paid-service model by utilizing the interest towards adult content and BL on mobile devices by women who were willing to purchase these contents. Lezhin increased the BL content on their platform in order to meet the market demand and gain profits.¹³³ With this strategy webtoon platforms and companies increased in number while BL genre has gained even more visibility. Also, it was revealed that if fans liked a content in one media form, they would follow its adaptation into another as well. In other words, when a fan likes a web novel and that web novel is turned into a webtoon, they consume the webtoon as well. By the same logic, if that webtoon is turned into a drama series they follow and consume it as well. Hence, in the South Korean BL context a cultural product is produced and benefitted through multi-media forms.

Compared with China, Korea seems to be allowing and profiting from the commercialization of BL works more liberally.¹³⁴ Korea's case is rather interesting since it once showed the same inclination as China to ban 'homosexual' content by

¹³¹ Ibid., 83.

¹³² Ibid., 85.

¹³³ Park, "Namsŏng tongsŏngae," in Kwon, "The Commercialization and Popularization of Boys Love in South Korea," 85.

¹³⁴ There are many platforms online and offline that monetize BL products without strict censorships whereas in China even though many BL content exist producing or distributing them is rather risky for the creators if they step outside of the boundaries determined by the Chinese government. They have to self-censor or if they do not self-censor they need to publish their works abroad in Taiwan. Their works has a slimmer chance, compared to Korea to be adopted to webtoons, dramas, or anime/donghua without the content being changed into heterosexual romance or bromance, erasing its core.

the hand of law¹³⁵ as it was mentioned previously, but later on gave up on that practice to allow more freedom to creators legally. However, this does not mean that general public in Korea, where Confucian heteropatriarchal societal norms, Protestantism, traditional conservatism and misogyny are rather prevalent, is all acceptant and tolerant of the notions such as homosexuality or queerness. Hence, even though legally there seems to be no enforcement or punishment for BL content it is not a widespread and widely accepted genre as well. It is only that the creators are not actively prevented or intervened by the Korean government unlike Chinese government does.

In the case of Korea, webtoon platforms such as Lezhin, Tappytoon, Tapas, etc. present English translations themselves hence gaining not only domestic but also foreign fans and profit. This provides better grounds for discussion since what is popular in Korea gets translated and presented to the foreign consumers. Hence, works and tropes gets attention without any intervention from a third party in between as in the case of Chinese contents. Also, since it reflects what is popular domestically, it provides us with a better understanding of the inner workings and trends of Korean BL sphere giving us a more objective perspective. Another important aspect to Korean BL is that creators have creative freedom hence the visual medium of webtoon has flourished immensely. However, since from the beginning commercialization of the cultural products has driven the genre, creators are encouraged or forced by these platforms to produce the similar-type of contents that gather fan interaction and attention. Thus, in a way the freedom to create is

¹³⁵ Youth Protection Act's purpose is stated as: The purpose of this Act is to ensure juveniles grow up into persons of sound character by regulating the distribution of media products, drugs, etc. harmful to juveniles and juveniles' access to harmful business establishments and by protecting and relieving juveniles from harmful environments. (Article 1). It is first enacted in 1997.

hindered by the capitalistic urges of the platforms themselves rather than the active involvement of the government.

This chapter has illustrated the BL spheres in both countries and the differences between them. The next chapter will analyze what has been illustrated and discussed so far in a theoretical framework.



CHAPTER 5

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

5.1 Power, hegemony, and consent in Chinese and Korean discourses

Foucault's theory of power, biopolitics, governance, discipline and surveillance present a foundation for many of the issues regarding to the relationship among Korean and Chinese states, and BL, and women. In "The History of Sexuality, Volume I" Foucault (1976) defines power as not something repressive and prohibiting but rather something productive. It produces how one experiences and conceives sexuality through cultural normative practices and scientific discourses.¹³⁶ Chinese and Korean governments in this framework can be understood as owners of power, shaping the cultural normative practices through their reactions or how much visibility they allow to certain politics and concepts such as queerness, identity politics, feminism, and BL.

In this context it can be seen that Korean and Chinese discourses of power, even though some nuances exist, are similar to each other in the sense that the power is built and exercised on similar grounds. Confucian tradition functions as a building stone for both of these nations which dictates a heteropatriarchal, hierarchical, and gendered order. Where women as well as men have certain duties that are expected of them. A woman is expected to be feminine in the sense that she has to be dutiful, subservient, and full of servitude towards her father, husband, son, her and her husband's families. A man on the other hand is expected to be masculine, which is defined as being assertive, strong, stoic, dominant, observing proper behavior toward his superiors and inferiors. A man and a woman must marry, procreate in order to

¹³⁶ Gutting and Oksala, "Michel Foucault."

continue the family line who will observe the ancestral worship and rites, also move their nations forward. While their Confucian past manifest in a similar manner through Korean and Chinese ways of life, as well as their psyche and framework for their world views, the way they experienced modernity which forced them into a sudden and accelerated modernization process shape their relationship with ‘new’ concepts that are introduced to these societies by their global interactions with the West. As it will be discussed in more detail in the following section, the manner they have modernized do have certain differences however, this ‘compressed modernization’ as Chang (1999)¹³⁷ termed it, produced certain contradictions within both of these societies whereby ‘modern’ and radical concepts and practices exist alongside the conservative practices and traditional mindsets. The regime types of China and Korea may be the opposites on paper however, it is also true that Korean democracy is still not a full-fledged pluralist liberal democracy but rather an electoral non-pluralist democracy with conservative undertones and authoritative reflexes. Chinese state on the other hand, is under the control of the Communist Party and defines its regime as a socialist state under ‘democratic dictatorship’¹³⁸ in which the supreme power lies within and exercised by the CCP. Therefore, these commonalities between them results in the common purpose that they use their power to shape and control certain cultural and social discourses as well as creating the norms themselves. Hence, even though the objective is same for Chinese and Korean states the severity of the practices may differ.

In the context of BL content, platformization is a useful tool for governments since they can directly manage the platforms through either their relations with their parent companies and/or their institutional and legislative power according to their

¹³⁷ Chang, “Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents,” 30-55.

¹³⁸ Bose, “Mao Zedong and the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” 67-85.

ideologies and impose their agendas, imposing censorship or restrictions on certain type of contents since governments have the ‘power’ to allow them to conduct business through these platforms. By allowing certain contents more visibility, governments shape how queerness appears and understood by people. In this context, Korea has a more advanced case of platformization with its multiple platforms and high number of works in BL, however China is more direct in intervening with the contents and what they exhibit.

When BL contents from platforms such as Jinjiang, Lezbin, Tappy Toons, Naver Webtoons, etc. are taken into consideration, it can be argued that they do not acknowledge queerness as an identity and most of them do not represent problems regarding to a character’s queer identity. Characters face problems and challenges due to their economic or social backgrounds, problems caused by clashing with a figure of authority, or hardships of life in general. Queerness do not exist in these works as an identity or as anything that leads to identity politics. Inherently by pairing two males instead of depicting a heterosexual and heteroromantic relationship these works defy the cultural and ideological hegemony endorsed by these two nations. However, Chinese and Korean governments, in turn, shape queerness as something existing solely as a fantasy. Governments also shape people as neoliberal consumer-individuals who consume in accordance with their desires. The current neoliberal system gives the message that individuals are free to choose and consume while it reproduces patriarchal norms with a different packaging which for women can be illustrated through Gill’s postfeminism which will be discussed later on. As it was also illustrated by Ho et al., (2018), freedom of individuals, especially women, seems to be shaped by market logics.¹³⁹ By the same logic, BL is

¹³⁹ Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,” 486-521.

‘allowed’ to exist in some sort of type rather than being banned altogether is partly due to the fact that it produces both monetary, social, and symbolic capital for Korea, and for China although it is not exactly considered as soft power it still produces revenue and even China cannot constantly repress and force the public if it wants to maintain compliance of the people. Also, China is not as integrated as Korea to the global economy in the sense that it aims to dominate it as a powerhouse in contrast with Korea’s harmonious soft power strategy.

On the other hand, as an evidence for their authoritarian reflexes and intolerant approaches, when the cultural hegemony is felt to be threatened it can be seen that both countries have shown authoritarian reflexes through censoring/banning content. First of all, in both countries porn is illegal to produce and distribution of it is punishable by law (Korean Criminal Law Articles 243-244¹⁴⁰, Chinese Public Security Administration Punishments Law Article 68¹⁴¹). Also, China’s anti-pornography laws, and homosexual content being categorized as abnormal sexual behavior and it being considered as pornography, along with Korea’s Youth Protection Act which had banned homosexual content in any media form until 2004¹⁴² are indicative examples for illustrating their reactions when the patriarchal, heteronormative, Confucian-conservative hegemonies are threatened by what is deemed as immoral and harmful. In the context of BL, China shows a harsher

¹⁴⁰ Ministry of Justice, “Criminal Act.”

¹⁴¹ “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Penalties for Administration of Public Security.”

¹⁴² Even though it has been more than 20 years since Korea has lifted its ban on homosexual content under the Youth Protection Act, unlike Taiwan who has decriminalized and recognized same-sex marriage, has enacted laws against sexual orientation and gender based discrimination, Korea has not undergone a legal and social transformation in this sense. It is not an LGBTQ+ plural society since it does not acknowledge, show legal or societal support toward LGBTQ+ people and issues. For further insight on Taiwanese democratization, the civil society’s role in it and Taiwanese LGBTQ+ movement, see Kaustav Padmapati, “Democratic Transition, New Taiwanese Identity and Queer Rights Movements in Taiwan: Assessing the Linkages,” ICS, February 2022, <https://icsin.org/publications/democratic-transition-new-taiwanese-identity-and-queer-rights-movements-in-taiwan-assessing-the-linkages#>.

attitude since it bans *danmei* it deems ‘obscene’ which openly depicts love and sexual relationship between two men, jails¹⁴³ creators who produce *danmei* in a ‘harmful’ way when they distribute their work and generate income from those works. Korea, on the other hand, does not resort to such harsh courses of action but has rather more ‘implicit’ ways in shaping the discourse of BL.

I will try to illustrate this difference between their reactions first by bringing attention to two different mediums of BL that are popular in these countries respectively, then explaining Korea’s strategy. In China since it is a bit harder to flag down ‘harmful’ *danmei* among hundreds of thousands of work and censor or ban them when they are on the internet, web novels have become the most popular medium for BL. In the Korean case, it seems that the more visual the content the better it is. The reason for that lies in Korea’s wonderful job in platformization especially in accordance with its technological improvements such as widespread usage of smart phones. Hence, webtoon platforms present fans with an easy-to-access experience which allows them to access content from anywhere and in anytime. As a result, webtoon came to be the most widespread medium of BL. My opinion is that unlike China, Korea represents another extreme in that it allows heavily sexually explicit and mature-themed works in visual forms through webtoons which, I argue, has an instant and more drastic impact on the consumer compared to a web novel, for example. I do not think it sanitizes BL in the same sense as China. One look at the BL sections of webtoon platforms would illustrate that heavily mature content is abound across many platforms. Works such as *BJ Alex*, *Painter of*

¹⁴³ For further insight see: Bai, “Regulation of Pornography and Criminalization of BL Readers and Authors in Contemporary China (2010–2019),” 279–301, Tian, “More than Conformity or Resistance,” 189–213, and Ruixin Zhang, “The Price of Writing Smut: Inside China’s Crackdown on Erotic Fiction,” What’s on Weibo, April 14, 2025, <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/the-price-of-writing-smut-inside-chinas-crackdown-on-erotic-fiction/>.

the Night, Pearl Boy, Jinx, Wet Sand, The Hounds of Sisyphus and many more are some of the most popular works in these platforms and all of them have sexually explicit content. These works that are extremely popular and heavily consumed, aside from bringing profit to these platforms and to the government, they help keeping BL and queerness in the fantasy realm. They cement the feeling that what is being depicted in these stories are not real since these stories themselves are hard to identify with and relate to by women let alone actual queer/gay people. Most of the time these stories being so extreme, they do not represent reality, in fact they do not have such aim or claim, hence they do not present any real-life possibilities like a heterosexual romance novel would for women. Engaging in BL content in this context does not urge one to think politically on queer/LGBTQ+ issues or engage in identity politics in general. I posit that by allowing plethora of sexually explicit BL content, Korea desensitize fans by exposing them to unrealistic narratives. Of course, we should also keep in mind that works that are seen extreme or scandalous attracts more attention and more visibility thus bringing more revenue by interaction. *Killing Stalking* by Koogi illustrates this rather well. Its topic was disturbing and leaned more towards thriller than regular BL, but it attracted a great deal of attention from BL fans since it depicted the dangerous, co-dependent, and toxic relationship between two men. It should also be understood that by the nature of platformization contents that attract more attention will become more visible, contents that bring more revenue also become more visible by being promoted on the main pages of these platforms. Even if these explicit and mature contents are not promoted on purpose by the reason of them being explicit, but rather them generating reactions and consumed by fans they are still highly visible either way and are not censored. This, in my opinion, illustrates the relationship between governments and

platforms/contents motivated by market demand, profit, and governments reflex of protecting their hegemony as owners of power.

5.1.2 Biopolitics and governance

Biopower in Foucauldian sense is different from the sovereign power, or power exercised by the governments in this context, in the sense that power is exercised through “regulative and corrective mechanisms based on scientific knowledge.”¹⁴⁴ Foucault describes biopower as a form of power which aims to influence life positively, “subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”¹⁴⁵ Both Chinese and Korean governments at some point put biopolitical policies into effect in their endeavors of modernization. Their family-planning policies, China’s one-child policy along with Korea’s encouragement on having one or two children at most, their encouragement of and educating women on contraceptive methods, informing people on sexual conduct and on how to perform intimate behaviors, encouraging marriage in a heterosexual framework can be given as examples of them shaping sexual morality, behaviors, norms, and discourse of their respective societies.^{146 147}

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Managing the health of the nation through biopower can also manifest through the online sphere as well. By supervising platforms, governments also shape and enforce acceptable sexual expressions and morality as illustrated by China where platforms through their infrastructure encourage reporting and have become tools of discipline.¹⁴⁹ From the perspective of the Chinese state, maintaining national

¹⁴⁴ Gutting and Oksala, “Michel Foucault.”

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics,”

¹⁴⁷ Zarafonetis, *Sexuality in a Changing China*,

¹⁴⁸ Cho, “Making the ‘Modern’ Family,” 802-18

¹⁴⁹ Boys’ Love in the Chinese Platformization of Cultural Production

morality, protecting the youth from obscenity, promoting ‘healthy sexuality’ in heteronormative marital units are its duties and how it ensures the wellbeing of the public majority of which already holds these values due to the traditional Confucian mindset. These actions by the state can be understood as a biopolitical project in itself.¹⁵⁰ China also uses punishment as a way to discipline in order to enforce the sexual discourse and morality advocated by its state ideology. Incarcerating or fining authors are designed as ways of reminding those who walk the fine line between what is allowed and what is punishable, the power of state over people’s desires and sexual expressions. It also polices ways to present masculinity and femininity as a part of its biopolitical control. In 2021, Chinese state banned effeminate male role models¹⁵¹ who transgressed the boundaries it set for genders, for example. These crack-downs on people whose identities remain on the peripheries to state’s discourse cause people to internalize state norms and act accordingly. By shaping the whole discourse on sexuality and morality the government presents people the norms which they are expected to conform. In the context of BL contents, authors self-censor to avoid platform bans, fines, or arrest. Content creators more often than not change their stories to make them appear heteronormative if the works are going to be adapted into different mediums such as in the cases for *The Untamed* and *Word of Honor*. Jinjiang, for example, incorporated a reporting function to its platform “encouraging readers to flag transgression of rules to government censors.”¹⁵² The reporting of readers and authors to the police is encouraged by the government which relies on a large-scale, omnipresent reporting system in its censorship campaign since

¹⁵⁰Jeffreys and Yu, *Sex in China*, Introduction

¹⁵¹ Yaling, “China’s ‘Anti-Sissy’ Campaign Unleashes a Wave of Online Transphobia.”

¹⁵² Wang, “Censorship and Circumvention in China,” 144.

2018.¹⁵³ Platforms on the other hand, are important social spaces for fans where they can chat, hold discussions and share recommendations, preserve the history of the fandom.¹⁵⁴ Platforms also dominate the production and distribution of BL content thus for a creator to share what they create, generate income, and participate in fan culture they need to be on these platforms. This is illustrated by Nieborg & Poell (2018)'s concept of platform capitalism which will be discussed in detail. To briefly summarize beforehand, platform capitalism enables companies to monetize user behavior, control visibility through algorithms, in the case of China this merges with state power, and in collaboration with the governments it may impose censorship and moderation on its users. The dependence on these platforms, then, inevitably shapes fans' behaviors through its design. The reporting button and increasing number of reports made about authors by readers and other fellow authors exhibits these points rather well. Even the grounds for reporting are predetermined, for example, for Jinjiang "pornography" and "harm to underage individuals" seem to be common reasons for reporting as illustrated by Zhang (2024).¹⁵⁵ The predetermined reasons and the reasons themselves showcase the interventionist nature of the Chinese government. Protecting the society from the harms of pornography as well as ensuring the well-being of the youth in this case are extensions of the government's biopolicy and its pledge to the public. The state, then, shapes the discourse on sexuality and morality as well as fan behavior by leading them to self-censor or circumvent the censors by metaphor usage, code-switching, or satire. These

¹⁵³ Bai, "Regulation of Pornography and Criminalization of BL Readers and Authors in Contemporary China (2010–2019)," 287.

¹⁵⁴ Zhang, "Boys' Love in the Chinese Platformization of Cultural Production," 15.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 15.

circumvention tactics are also consistent with Foucault's definition of power that "where there is power there is always resistance too," even though minor.¹⁵⁶

Korea on the other hand, seem to be regarding queerness as something marketable to a certain degree, as long as it does not threaten to affect public opinion and gather major public attention. It did not resort to censoring apart from the censorship it put on 'homosexual content' on the web from 2001 to 2003, through Information and Communications Ethics Committee. However, in Korean moral and sexual discourse, which is inherently conservative, queerness is still not favored. Thus, even though the Korean government does not outright censor or ban content like the Chinese government, it still promotes the existing discourse and its ideology. It aestheticizes queerness in BL content and through K-pop boy groups which is used to add appeal for monetizing the cultural productions and strengthening its soft power strategy, *Hallyu*. However, through the state policy the government still enforces heteronormative family structures since queer rights are not acknowledged by Korean law. Korea's former-president Yoon Suk-yeol (May 2022-April 2024)'s, whose majority of electors are men who are in their early-20s, misogynistic statements along with his pledge to abolish Ministry of Gender Equality and Family¹⁵⁷ gives us some context on the recent situation with regards to conservative and patriarchal framework of Korean society. In this context, marketable queerness is allowed but it is still regarded as a taboo by the majority of public. This can be best illustrated through the queer people in the Korean entertainment industry. Very few people has had courage to 'come out' as LGBTQ+ individuals but the ones that came out faced severe backlash initially. What is really interesting but at the same time

¹⁵⁶ Gutting and Oksala, "Michel Foucault."

¹⁵⁷ Gunia, "South Korea's Yoon Suk-Yeol Used Anti-Feminism to Win Election."

another evidence to my argument is the fact that even though fans do ship¹⁵⁸ male-male idols with each other, any type of rumor about two K-pop idols may be dating in real life referred to as ‘scandal’ and gather harsh reactions from fans. Thus, while media with queer aesthetics thrive, real LGBTQ+ people face backlash. By the hand of government queer politics and struggle for rights are depoliticized, queerness is aestheticized especially in K-pop and BL content. Government’s rhetoric continues to enforce its moral and sexual ideology, shape what is considered normal, moral, and which expressions of sexuality are acceptable. Even though, Korea’s actions does not seem to be as on the face as China’s it still utilizes platforms as platform-based cultural economy has been flourishing, and content curation as a way to enforce its biopolicy.

Both states shape the discourse on morality, sexuality, and acceptable identities through their biopolicies. Governments’ official standings and discourses are re-enforced in online platforms. Platformization of cultural industries provides them further reach in shaping the behaviors of fans and the infrastructures of platforms enables surveillance and direct intervention to content and discourse. In the case of BL, by outright censoring content, jailing, or fining authors as well as invasive use of reporting function showcases China’s authoritarian actions. Korea although possessing same reflexes as an entity of power, chooses a subtle way in its control. It seems to be prioritizing market demand and cultural revenue, also being a non-pluralist electoral democracy such outright attempts of censoring and banning content or jailing authors would still probably bring unwanted repercussions from the people which would threaten the cultural hegemony of the regime in a bigger magnitude. As illustrated by the many protests by Korean public over the years,

¹⁵⁸ Shipping or coupling refers to when fans pair two or more fictional or real-life people with each other in a romantic and sexual context.

when they think there is any intervention to their rights and freedom in general, they do not tolerate those transgressions in a true democratic reflex. Even though a possible censoring would affect fans who are on the periphery, the act of censoring itself is an indicator of authoritarian mindset hence may be unacceptable by the majority. Thus, instead of choosing the higher risk authoritarian actions, Korean government chooses to use “carrots” by shaping the discourse, providing visibility to content in a depoliticized manner, further entrap queerness in the realm of fantasy through BL, and emphasize conservative, patriarchal rhetoric which undermines gender equality therefore, gathering support from the right components of the society and rendering them more visible, giving them a voice.

5.1.3 Discipline and surveillance

Foucault defines modern disciplinary society as where power or control over people is exercised merely by observing them.¹⁵⁹ Modern disciplinary power, according to Foucault, was shaped after Bentham’s Panopticon.¹⁶⁰ Even though the guards, in this case the government, do not always see or inspect each person constantly, the point is they could in any given moment.¹⁶¹ Thus, authors or fans not knowing whether they are being observed or not, must behave accordingly, must exercise self-censor or produce content in a way that circumvents the censors. The possibility of being seen is what controls people rather than actual supervision. As it was discussed previously, incorporating mechanisms of reporting in fan spaces functions exactly in this

¹⁵⁹ Gutting and Oksala, “Michel Foucault.”

¹⁶⁰ Jeremy Bentham suggests *Panopticon* as a prison design which would allow constant surveillance of the prisoners. For Foucault *Panopticon* was a sustained political project and a blueprint for reformist liberalism. For Foucault *Panopticon* symbolized an enactment of surveillance for the prisoners who must assume ubiquitous surveillance, that they may be under inspection any time. See Greg Elmer, “Panopticon—Discipline—Control,” in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012), 21–29.

¹⁶¹ Gutting and Oksala, “Michel Foucault.”

pervasive manner, forcing people to internalize self-surveillance and discipline. China in “sticks and carrots” rhetoric chooses sticks where it exerts its disciplinary power and constructs a surveillance society. Censorships and accompanying disciplinary actions¹⁶² shapes not just BL fandom but also shapes the whole framework of desire. It constructs acceptable discourses of queerness, gender roles, and sexual practices. Queerness is only allowed if it is alluded in the shape of “bromance or socialist brotherhood.”¹⁶³ Even behaving or presenting outside the acceptable gender representations are disciplinable acts by the government, just like in the case of crackdown on people with effeminate presenting masculinities, pushing them into the peripheries, erasing their visibility and rights of expression. In the case of BL, self-disciplining results in less sexually explicit, more romantic contents that can also be manipulated by the cultural hegemony into acceptable narratives of “bromance or socialist brotherhood.” The 2012 CCTV Spring Festival Gala case illustrates how queer aesthetics are utilized to produce popularity through the narrative of ‘bromance’ between men. Two male performers, Wang Leehom and Li Yundi, were openly ‘shipped’ under the guise of ‘bromance’ by the show’s hosts where they made jokes and purposely paired the performers together. After the show, the shipping of those two performers became a hot topic on social media and garnered further attention to the show.¹⁶⁴ ¹⁶⁵ Yi (2013) and Zhang (2016), on the other hand, argue that as illustrated by such events, BL culture could contribute to a more open attitude in discussing sex and queerness,¹⁶⁶ and as Darling-Wolf (2003) in

¹⁶² Bai, “Regulation of Pornography and Criminalization of BL Readers and Authors in Contemporary China (2010–2019),” 279-301.

¹⁶³ Ng and Li, “A Queer ‘Socialist Brotherhood,’” 489-90.

¹⁶⁴ Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much,” 263.

¹⁶⁵ Zhou, ‘From Online BL Fandom to the CCTV Spring Festival Gala,’ quoted in Yang and Xu, “‘Opening the Door to a New World,’” 229.

¹⁶⁶ Yi, “Reflection on Chinese Boys’ Love Fans,” in Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much,” 263.

Zhang (2016) suggests it can facilitate a “female-influenced shift”¹⁶⁷ in the future of China with regards to sexuality and gender. I digress in the sense that, the society, especially the youth may become more open regarding to these subjects, however, when the Chinese government’s actions and reactions are taken into consideration a widespread normalization or acceptance of queerness does not seem probable. State apparatuses are used on everything that presents any divergence from the ideological and cultural framework, they are ‘disciplined’ and also in the discourse of love and sexuality “homosexual love” in the first place defined as an abnormality. In a highly intrusive nation like China, a grassroots change of mentality may be hard to expect. This case rather illustrates the aestheticization of queerness under the guise of ‘bromance,’ similar to the case of K-pop boy groups in Korean context. Both cases showcase how aestheticization of queerness is utilized in order to increase fan engagement and interest, while real life queerness remains as taboo, different sexual identities and expressions are still not being accepted and acknowledged.

Korea on the other hand, as it was stated before, seems to be not as prolific as China in disciplining its citizens with overt, ‘pervasive’ methods, preferring rather ‘carrots’ in this context. Historically, the cultural norms and in the initial modernization stage, education promoted a binary and patriarchal gender order. The purpose for women’s education was seen as raising them to be good wives and wise mothers.^{168 169} Women’s joining to the work force was and still is not on equal grounds with men, women still get paid less than men, and burdened with child rearing, taking care of the household chores and duties. Even though, many advances were made during the period of modernization, such as Ministry of Gender

¹⁶⁷ Darling-Wolf, “Male Bonding and Female Pleasure,” in Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much,” 263.

¹⁶⁸ Bunaeva et al., Transformation of a Female Gender Identity in South Korea,” 3-7.

¹⁶⁹ Maynes, “Korean Perceptions of Chastity, Gender Roles, and Libido,” 4-10.

Equality's establishment that advocated for gender equality, systematically, patriarchal order in the education and labor sectors remains for the most part.¹⁷⁰ The government's official stance and rhetoric not only build on this existing framework but also its legitimacy for the most part leans on the reiteration of this framework. Allowing misogynist acts and discourses, not enforcing necessary strict responses against crimes against women (sexual harassments, formations such as *Nth Room*¹⁷¹, femicides, *molka*¹⁷² incidents, femicides, unequal pay, etc.) and promises such as shutting down the Ministry of Gender Equality, enhances the current cultural hegemony and power which favors heterosexual men.

To sum up, both governments produce and shape norms of sexuality, gender, queerness, and gender/sexual identities. Platform capitalism also provides governments with a tool to either censor or curate content, exercising their power further. In terms of discipline and surveillance, Chinese state heavily uses disciplinary mechanisms and instills self-surveillance to BL fans shaping how their cultural productions are produced, keeping queerness and BL as a form of fantasy with a limited existence. In the Korean context on the other hand, highly visible and highly popular works which are sexually explicit, sometimes shockingly so, tend to be imitated and repeated more which desensitize fans to queer identity politics and real life empathy further by heavy exposure, trapping BL and queerness further into the realm of fantasy. While both states' motivations seem to be similar, depending on same rationale their methods seem to differ as it was illustrated. The reason for this

¹⁷⁰ Han and Chun, "Introduction: Gender and Politics in Contemporary Korea," 245-50

¹⁷¹ The Telegram Nth Room was a cybersex crime case that occurred from the second half of 2018 to March of 2020. A group of men lured women, coerced them by threatening them to film pornographic videos (sexual exploitation videos) of themselves which they in turn sold those videos in the private chat room called 'Nth Room.' See Joohee Kim and Jamie Chang, "Nth Room Incident in the Age of Popular Feminism: A Big Data Analysis," *Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature & Culture* 14, no. 14 (2021): 261-87.

¹⁷² Filming/picturing women with a spy camera without their consent.

difference lies in their attitudes towards being articulated to global economy. Korea adopts soft power strategy as a way to join in to the global economy and as it is demonstrated by the *Hallyu* policy this strategy has been a success thus, any cultural product that generates soft power is valuable and useful for Korea. Therefore, even though BL has elements that defies the cultural discourse produced by Korea it still has value and generates revenue in the global economic arena preventing Korea to outright ban and censor the content. China, on the other hand, does not follow the same strategy in order to be articulated to global economy as it can be evidenced from the absence of a concrete strategy like *Hallyu* that generates major success. Hence, China does not have the same level of inclination to tolerate BL or any content that seems to be promoting queer elements openly.

This difference of severity between their attitudes towards BL or concepts that defy their cultural and ideological hegemonies brings us to the question of how they built consent for their power in order to establish and legitimize their ‘right to rule.’ Here, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony would be useful in explaining Chinese and Korean attitudes. Gramsci argues that people are not ruled solely by force but also by ideas. According to Gramsci, creating a *Weltanschauung*¹⁷³ is what makes the ruling class ‘ruling.’ States or the ruling class utilize ideas to preserve the ideological unity of the society. Gramsci defines “hegemony” as a form of political rule. Hegemony means that political leadership and power is gained and maintained by the consent of the led. The ruling class achieve this consent by spreading and popularizing their world view, *Weltanschauung*.¹⁷⁴ Ideological consent grants power to the ruling class. Today, besides education and religion, media plays a crucial role in reproducing and reiterating consent. States utilize media to both build and

¹⁷³ A philosophy, a world view.

¹⁷⁴ Bates, “Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony,” 351.

maintain their ideological hegemony. They define the boundaries and control what is allowed and visible in media.

In the context of BL as a cultural production, it can be argued that Chinese and Korean reactions toward BL is intertwined with how they built consent and gain hegemony. In the Korean case BL in webtoon form is especially relevant and popular. Webtoon as a cultural product has also become a part of the third wave of *Hallyu*, also referred to as *Hallyu* 3.0. Choi (2015) defines *Hallyu* as a “strategic project” of the Korean government. As it will be discussed later on, *Hallyu* is also defined by Choi as the popularity and warm reception of Korean culture in non-Korean territories.¹⁷⁵ However, the Korean state utilizes *Hallyu* as a national-institutional endeavor to expand its political and economic scope and relevance. Hence, it directly arranges content and intervenes with it. The government, beside from its natural authority through law that allows it to inspect and deny content has also a say in *Hallyu* content through its adoption of *Hallyu* as a national-institutional campaign. Through *Hallyu*’s carefully curated media the government defines what is desirable, legitimate, and modern. Media produced under *Hallyu* such as K-pop and K-drama present a vision of beauty, gender norms wrapped in pretty packages, and also encouraging consumerism and nationalism. What is of interest here is that more often than not queer aesthetics make their way into Korean media products. Fans of K-pop boy groups for example, ‘ship’ members of the group with each other, creating fan arts, fan fictions, video edits, etc. Hence, through K-pop, webtoons, and recently BL dramas that are only streamed in online platforms, and animations, queerness is being commodified. However, this commodification of queerness does not provide visibility in a political sense to queer/LGBTQ+ identities or issues. Rather, BL

¹⁷⁵ Choi, “Hallyu versus Hallyu-Hwa,” 40.

rendering them ‘highly visible’ and accessible entraps them into the realm of fantasy even more. This, again ties into government’s endeavor to hold onto its cultural hegemony. When BL or queerness is perceived as fantasy or metaphor and not exactly real, the heteronormative ideology of the state is accentuated even more. In order to impose and maintain its ideology, Korean government chooses what may be called a ‘negotiated hegemony’ rather than outright censoring or banning BL content. BL is only ‘allowed’ to present a depoliticized and sanitized queerness that traps itself to the realm of fantasy which is enough to gain profit from markets but not enough to challenge the dominant ideology and not enough to turn into identity politics in a scale which is seen in the West.¹⁷⁶ Thus, through *Hallyu* Korean government promotes an ideal ‘Korean’ profile who is beautiful, always seem put together, proud of its ancient-history especially *Joseon* aesthetics with the beautiful *hanbok* garments, and relatively politically neutral, not raising any political issues, also globally integrated to the world by its consuming habits and materialistic tendencies. Also, through *Hallyu*’s success being Korean and from Korea which is a modern and affluent nation is presented as a source of pride and the government’s role in supporting it earns the government the compliance it needs from the public.

In the Chinese context, the government follows harsher methods against BL as it was established from time to time during this discussion. It bans content that showcases overtly queer elements in order to maintain its ideological and cultural hegemony. As it was illustrated above China utilizes tactics of surveillance and harsh punishments towards what it deems as a threat to its power. Concepts such as the emphasized difference between men and women, gender seen as being binary, and defined gender roles, censorship of pornography, heteronormative marriage being

¹⁷⁶ It must be remembered that BL itself does not aim to be political, it is not created and consumed in order to promote queer or feminist rights but rather to entertain and ‘have fun.’

encouraged and family being defined through heteronormative framework illustrate the ideological hegemony of the state in Gramscian context. BL revolving around the love between two males is queer in its nature and it defies the cultural and sexual hegemony established by the Chinese government. While it shapes the cultural and social discourse by curating media, Chinese government also asserts its full authority through surveillance and punishment. As it is stated by Wang (2022), in Weberian thought people's compliance can be maintained by the legitimacy of the government.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, the Chinese government, who does not follow more 'moderate' tactics that are guised under the glow of national pride and accomplishment, materialistic beauty and style created by *Hallyu* like Korea does, but rather engages in overpowering practices to shape the dominant discourse as well as to establish cultural hegemony, builds consent and legitimacy in the eyes of Chinese people in a different manner. One important part of this consent building is the ideological trust that the Chinese citizens harbor toward the political system of China which claims to protect the democratic rights of the majority towards the 'enemy,' the former bourgeoisie elite and landowners, who might want to rise against the current socialist democracy. Another important aspect is the way how Chinese government also utilizes surveillance and biopolitics in order to provide better wellbeing¹⁷⁸ and prosperity for its population through its political system and economic system. No government can rule and no regime can persevere solely through oppression and violence¹⁷⁹ therefore the Chinese state had to have built consent through different ways beside punishment and violence. As Wang (2022) argues, people, in their power relationship with the state, expect their living

¹⁷⁷ Wang, "Manufacturing Compliance with 'Rule by Design,'" 9.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 11.

situations to be optimized in order for them to be compliant with the state authority.¹⁸⁰ Chinese government in this context, builds consent through tolerant approaches such as benefit allocation whereby it rewards people with material rewards and welfare benefits¹⁸¹ and constructing social knowledge through education, propaganda, and/or manipulated information, along with its intolerant approaches such as censorship and punishment. It both monitors public expectations and adjusts its policies in order to meet them and it also intentionally shapes the public's expectations.¹⁸² In the eyes of people, China presents the current regime and its intolerant methods toward any 'dissidents' as necessary and beneficial for people's safety, integrity of the traditional values and culture of the Chinese. To soften any public non-compliance these restrictions may cause, it allocates material benefits, provides welfare, and prosperity for the public through what can be called a 'moral leadership.' When the living conditions of people are optimized as much as possible, compliance whether forced, seduced, or constructed¹⁸³ is gained. As it is illustrated by its attitude toward queer/BL content as well, Chinese government in this sense follows a hybrid path where it utilizes both strategies to maintain its legitimacy.

In sum, power is maintained through ideological consent¹⁸⁴ and it seems that Korea and China try to build this consent through different methods. They both exert their power on society whether through laws, censors or careful curation of content. Their attitudes may be classified as either brute or soft but at the end of the day both ways serve the same reflex of governments: protecting their cultural and ideological

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸² Ibid., 14.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸⁴ Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," 352.

hegemony in Gramscian sense. It should also be kept in mind that just as China implementing a hybrid strategy in building its compliance by the public in which it cannot solely rely on constant violence and punishment, Korea too, cannot solely rely on tolerant policies such as maintaining the conservative social, cultural, and moral discourse through its rhetorics, supporting and allocating benefits to people who supports its ideology, and its education policies, and *Hallyu* project, but rather it utilizes its institutional power and has a tendency to censor or ban if need be.

5.2 Political economy of media & cultural production

One of the best example to political economy of media and cultural production comes in the shape of *Hallyu* or in Choi's term *Hallyu-hwa*. Different from the incipient stage of *Hallyu* which signifies the organic success of Korean cultures in overseas markets,¹⁸⁵ *Hallyu-hwa* emphasizes the government's involvement in the process, an engineered, synthetically arranged cultural flow administered by Korean state officials, electronics conglomerates, and the media industry itself.¹⁸⁶ When the government of Korea realized the potential Korean culture carried not just economically but also as a symbolic capital overseas, it started to get involved in promoting and also utilizing cultural products. Symbolic capital by Bourdieu can be understood as non-economic power or prestige which is presented through recognition, legitimacy, and prestige.¹⁸⁷ The success of *Hallyu* as a symbolic capital has also allowed Korean government to shut down any counter discourse and self-criticism under the guise of massive success of Korean nation overseas which appealed to people's nationalistic sensitivities. Due to this, Korean government has

¹⁸⁵ Choi, "Hallyu versus Hallyu-Hwa," 44.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸⁷ Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 81.

been able to assert its hegemony without overt force or coercion. Hence, *Hallyu-hwa* as an institutional campaign rather than a self-governing cultural occurrence has emerged.¹⁸⁸

Part of *Hallyu*'s immense success overseas is due to technological advancements and growth of widespread social media¹⁸⁹ and platformization of cultural products. As it was mentioned briefly above, judging by webtoon's popularity and influence it can be considered as a part of *Hallyu* 3.0. In January 2024, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism outlined its strategies and tasks to enhance webtoon industry "as a strategic industry to drive the Korean Wave..."¹⁹⁰ This action further proves webtoon being considered as a part of 3rd wave *Hallyu* by the Korean government as well. According to Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism's press release on January 18, 2024, Korean webtoon industry achieved KRW 1.8 trillion (around 1.2 trillion USD) in sales in 2022.¹⁹¹ Multiple platforms by different entertainment companies offer webtoon platforms such as Naver Webtoon, Lezhin Entertainment, Tappytoon, Kakao Entertainment, Tapas etc.¹⁹² Naturally, these platforms distribute BL content globally, furthermore it is the most popular genre of some platforms. As a popular genre of webtoon BL, hence, falls under *Hallyu* as well.

China's strict control over media and cultural industries illustrates another aspect of the relationship between state and cultural industries. There are several laws that ensure China's ideological hegemony is not harmed by any risky content that does not align with socialist values and Confucian ethics, namely the dominant

¹⁸⁸ Choi, "Hallyu versus Hallyu-Hwa," 47.

¹⁸⁹ Jin, "New Perspectives on the Creative Industries in the Hallyu 2.0 Era," 53-54

¹⁹⁰ Park, "Next Generation of Korean Wave Contents, Webtoon Industry Status and Prospects."

¹⁹¹ The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "Webtoon Industry Revenue."

¹⁹² Platforms that offer English-language content.

culture. These laws are utilized in censoring or banning content deemed harmful or obscene and harmful for the youth, and in some cases the creators of such content are jailed. China still aims to commercialize cultural products while demanding them to strictly adhere to its ideology.

Chinese state also endeavors to enhance its soft power through aid packages, trade and investment deals, generous loans as well as through media, the arts, sports, and other domains. It spends an estimated 10 billion USD (as of 2015) annually on this agenda.¹⁹³ According to the findings of China's Fifth National Economic Census cultural industries account for 5.9 trillion Yuan (812.9 billion USD), 4.59% of GDP in 2023.¹⁹⁴ Content creation and production has generated a business revenue of 645,6 million Yuan in the first quarter of 2023. These results may create a dilemma in that the authoritarian reflex of China to limit creative freedom in order to keep cultural products within its ideological borders versus the revenue cultural industries bring and their contribution to both total GDP of China and the agenda of soft power. In this case too, China follows a particular path in which it reconciles with private companies which are very much profit-driven by supporting them and in turn requiring them to implement self-regulation and censorship in their platforms. A case that illustrates this is the Jinjiang (Jinjiang Literature City)'s incorporation to one of the massive tech companies. Jinjiang which is one of the most prolific and crucial sites for Chinese *danmei* scene was a platform run by fans with fundraising efforts, however due to some financial difficulties the platform had to change hands resulting in Jinjiang's incorporation to Tencent. Thus, Jinjiang has become a part of Tencent's pan-entertainment landscape in 2014.¹⁹⁵ But BL has also become an essential part of

¹⁹³ Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push," 100.

¹⁹⁴ National Bureau of Statistics of China, "Value added of China's culture and Related Industries."

¹⁹⁵ Zhang, "Boys' Love in the Chinese Platformization of Cultural Production," 2.

Tencent's pan-entertainment platformization in the cultural industry.¹⁹⁶ As Zhang (2024) illustrates in her article, without the support of authorities Tencent's pan-entertainment strategy would not have been possible to achieve. In 2015 pan-entertainment industry was incorporated into the state agenda in the 13th National People's Congress.¹⁹⁷ However, close ties with governments are similar to double edged swords especially with cultural production. When Tencent incorporated Jinjiang into itself, BL with its dedicated fans who are from middle to upper class backgrounds with money to spend on their hobbies, has become a new site of revenue for Tencent. Here, the metaphor 'double edged sword' comes into play, on one edge there is government's support which relies on ideologically safe content while on the other edge there is the continuous profit from BL fan economy. From the perspective of the Chinese government contents that include queer elements such as BL can only be tolerated when they do not threaten their cultural hegemony, do not contain overt expressions or descriptions of homosexual behavior, and generate some sort of soft power in global scenes. However, since for China its ideological hegemony and integrity has more importance than its soft power endeavors it shows far more restricted tolerance toward BL content.

In both nations BL content is tolerated (in varying degrees) as long as it generates profit in accordance with the neoliberal framework. In this context neoliberal framework means that people in both nations are seen as consuming individuals. They are free to consume, date, and seek pleasure and their identities are built on their consumption.¹⁹⁸ Queer content in this case is only allowed when it is just a product to be consumed, existing only in the realm of fantasy without over

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 3-6

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 2

¹⁹⁸ Rofel, *Desiring China*, Introduction.

stepping its boundaries into the political realm.¹⁹⁹ Neoliberal market logic allows queer content a room for existence in the form of BL content and also queer-coded fan service by K-Pop idols and Chinese celebrities (in the Chinese case it is very restricted) hence rendering the content served by the entertainment industry more marketable, however it is not by any means legitimate. This is also one of the reasons why I have reservations in labeling BL as intrinsically queer literature since it is not allowed any space to become political or have any agenda besides presenting a realm of fantasy that provide women with space to explore, experiment, and play with gender and sexuality. BL does not acknowledge its characters as queer men, fictional universes in BL contents does not include or acknowledge homosexuality, queerness, and LGBTQ+ identities. Main characters are presented as heterosexual men who fall in love and desire another man. At the same time, it does not seem that the creators who produce these contents have such aim to politicize or represent queer identities through their work. Rather, it seems that for most of them the main concern is producing content that aligns with fan demand, hence monetizing their work in platforms such as Lezhin, Jinjiang, etc., where they create content. Nieborg and Poell (2018) explain platformization as: “The penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries.”²⁰⁰

It refers to the fact that platforms now are not just places where one can purely consume content but rather the content is monetized and regulated on how it is made and distributed. Platforms provide infrastructure rendering creators economically and technically dependent on them. Since they dominate the market the

¹⁹⁹ Yang and Xu, “*Danmei*, Xianqing, and the Making of a Queer Online Public Sphere in China,” 255.

²⁰⁰ Nieborg and Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production,” Abstract.

content they put forward is consumed by the masses and it is hard for independent artists to gain recognition by themselves or compete with these platforms. Thus, any creator who wants to gain visibility and monetize their work has to join these platforms. Once they join and sign contracts with these platforms, cultural producers such as authors and artists must obey the platform's rules and directions. The governments also regulate the platforms which are legally dependent on them to operate, hence they can regulate and curate the contents as well. For Korean and Chinese platforms, they enable youth cultures, in this context BL, to flourish enough to bring profit but in a sanitized and depoliticized manner. Thus, through these platforms governments shape not only sexual and gender norms, how queerness and appropriate sexuality appear but also behaviors that are acceptable. Especially for China, these platforms have become tools of moral regulation to some degree. Implementation of the reporting mechanism, which have resulted in arrest in some cases for users on sites such as Jinjiang, it increased state control further and eventually took self-governance away from fan communities themselves.²⁰¹ In Korean platforms that are mentioned here there does not seem to be a reporting mechanism functioning the same way as the Chinese counterparts in which when a reporting is made it is evaluated by the police.

As it is illustrated, both China and Korea place varying degrees of importance on soft power. This may be due to couple of reasons, but it appears that the aftermath of the economic crisis both countries have suffered has an important part to play. For Korea, 1997 Asian Financial Crisis which resulted in bankruptcy for major Korean companies had catastrophic consequences on the society and on the government itself. The Korean government had to take a loan from IMF in return for going

²⁰¹ Zhang, "Boys' Love in the Chinese Platformization of Cultural Production," 9-15.

through restructuring policies and programs.²⁰² China, on the other hand, was working toward improving its stagnant economic legacy from the Mao period. Initial step of its market reforms was opening up the country for foreign investment in late 1970s and early 1980s. The second step was privatization of state owned industry. Even though, China was not affected by the 1997 Financial Crisis as much as Korea did, its GDP had suffered and it also came to realize its economy's weaknesses that needed to be resolved. This economically tumultuous period for both countries functioned as a wakeup call in the sense that the need for alternative revenues, export sectors, and means of power and influence in the global arena were realized. Korean state turned to cultural industries as a mean for revenue generation and symbolic capital. Korea opened up media to private capital in order to create a neoliberal environment for cultural production and media. Korean state also supported cultural production through funding, support of training centers (Korea Creative Content Agency and KOFICE), and by promoting *Hallyu*.²⁰³ China having come to the same realization and witnessing the success of *Hallyu* seems to intensify its efforts as well. It allowed state-owned media entities to go commercial as well as private capital in the media sector from 1990s onward.²⁰⁴ However, they do not operate independently from the state and they are under strict surveillance. Furthermore, it is obvious that China has yet to catch a successful breakthrough like *Hallyu*.

In light of what is discussed previously, it can be said that platformization in this new era of cultural production provided Korea and China to further their endeavors in utilizing cultural industries as revenue generation and promote their soft

²⁰² Kim, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis," 2.

²⁰³ Jang and Kim, "Promoting Popular Culture (and) Tourism as National Policies," 250.

²⁰⁴ Bai, "Media Commercialization, Entertainment, and the Party-State."

power internationally. Domestically these platforms allowed them to curate or censor media according to their ideologies and helped maintain their cultural hegemony.

5.3 Modernization

Chang Kyung-Sup (1999, 2010)'s 'compressed modernity' refers to when a society experiences multiple processes of modernization such as economic growth, capitalist industrialization, urbanization, and democratization simultaneously in an extremely time and space-condensed manner.²⁰⁵ What took Western nations and societies for a couple of hundred years was actualized in a manner of decades in China and Korea as Chang (1999, 2010) demonstrates. This resulted in "the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system."²⁰⁶ Chinese and Korean initiatives which resulted in rapid economic growth meant that these nations were now in the global arena, interacting with other developed and 'modern' nations. Importing modern notions from them whether voluntarily or not, resulted in changes in different areas of these societies. However, since there was not enough time to process, adopt, and internalize these changes, traditional, modern, and postmodern norms, as well as values, institutions, and structures coexist in these societies. Considering the traditional conservative and patriarchal core values of both nations, the emergence and flourishing of BL, which is rather nonconforming to these values in its essence, can be explained by the coexistence of multiple values and perspectives from different eras of these nations as a result of 'compressed modernity' and it is illustrated by Chen (2017) and Williams (1977) how different notions and practices belonging different epochs interact and coexist in a society.

²⁰⁵ Chang, "Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents," and Chang, "The Second Modern Condition?"

²⁰⁶ Chang, "The Second Modern Condition?" 446.

Timewise both Korea and China has undergone major exterior transformations in a short period of time. By exterior I mean to refer to economic, material, and non-cultural impressions of these transformations; while interior changes refer to concepts that are intrinsic concerning values, social norms, traditions, a common outlook specific to a culture and its people. For example, exterior-wise Korea transformed from an agrarian society to an urban industrial economic mega power with its high-tech industry while China transformed from an agrarian Maoist socialist society to a global economic superpower. While on the exterior both nations present a very economically advanced and affluent look institutionally, they present hybrid qualities with their dominant cultures/ideologies which are themselves have some of their roots in their conservative past traditions and discourses. Both countries have Confucian familism as a core component, which is manifested by patriarchal, hierarchal, and social order which is gendered in a binary manner. Yet, Korea has gender equality laws (also Ministry of Gender Equality), a neoliberal capitalistic system, liberal democratic institutions although it is elite-driven and not fully established; while China, too, has gender equality laws protecting women (Article 18-21 under Rights and Interests Relating to Person and Personality),²⁰⁷ one party-rule is exercised along with neoliberal capitalist order and private entrepreneurship with a certain degree of state interference. Culturally both societies were introduced to different concepts which were brought over with their opening up to global market and integrating into capitalistic order as well. With an economically more secure context compared to war time struggles or pre-modernization conditions, liberal thoughts and practices such as human rights, gender equality, queer identities and rights, environmental awareness, etc., started to

²⁰⁷ Law of the People's Republic of China.

find or rather create a response from these societies. New youth cultures has also emerged in these backgrounds. Industries that aestheticize queerness, ‘feminized masculinity’ such as K-pop and C-pop ²⁰⁸ as well as BL started to emerge and has found a rather enthusiastic response from the youth, especially women, while these women themselves live in a patriarchal, family-centric, and from time to time censor-prone governments. While women are active participants of society and work force, they still suffer from traditional Confucian patriarchy which had penetrated both civil society and state institutions. They are bound by expectations that they marry and have children at some point and since the traditional mindset reflexively turn these expectations into reality women are offered lower positions, lower wages, and struggle finding work. “In 2024, the employment rates in South Korea were approximately 70.9% for men and 54.7% for women”²⁰⁹ while for China it is 71.6% for men and 59.9% for women in 2023 according to World Bank Gender Data Portal.²¹⁰ Women in China got paid 15% lower than men according to an annual survey in 2025.²¹¹ In 2022, women got paid 31.2% less than men in South Korea, the highest gender pay gap among OECD countries.²¹² Yet, at the same time they engage in feminism, use fashion for self-expression, they desire and consume as modern individuals in a neoliberal context. They have different identities between tradition, modernity, and global trends that overlap with each other. For example, they may have feminist thoughts and a world view living in patriarchal and conservative societies that favor rich men, expect women to marry and support their husbands even though they themselves continue working too, and they may engage in BL fan

²⁰⁸ Feminine expressions by men has been critiqued and banned by the Chinese government.

²⁰⁹ Yoon, “Employment Rate in South Korea.”

²¹⁰ World Bank, “China.”

²¹¹ Textor, “China.”

²¹² Dyvik, “Gender Pay Gap in OECD Countries 2022.”

culture while having homophobic views themselves, or no interest in real-life queer struggles whatsoever.²¹³

Another aspect that influences the different paths these two states followed in modernization is due to the manner of their economic leaps which, in turn is related to their regime types. After its liberation from colonial rule, South Korea, under the influence and aid of US, transitioned from an authoritarian regime to what can be called an electoral democracy. Democratic institutions and concepts such as election and parliament were imported rather than emerging organically and ‘democracy’ itself was initiated by elites who did not/would not have dismantle the underlying authoritarian nature of institutions. As the democratization did not occur organically as a grassroots demand for change, the structure of power did not change much since it was initiated by the political elite it has not reached the true pluralism of an actual democracy yet. This is also evidenced by authoritarian reflexes that emerge in times of power struggles such as military coups of 1961, 1979, and 1980, as well as the recent Martial Law Crisis of December 3, 2024, where Yoon Suk-Yeol accused the Democratic Party of conducting anti-state activities and declared martial law. These only illustrate the underlying reflexes and how power is perceived intrinsically by the Korean state. It assumed an export-led growth model from 1960s to 1990s in which state initiated and aided industrialization. During this process, family-owned large conglomerates, namely *Chaebol*, made an extremely rapid industrialization possible in close association with the government. *Chaebol* themselves and this collaboration between state and *chaebols* soon became a symbol of inequality and discontent with their corruption, elite politics, symbols of patriarchy and economic inequality.²¹⁴

²¹³ Of course, this does not mean there are no women interested in queer identity politics, but they do not seem to be forming the majority and they do not utilize BL or inspired by it for that end.

²¹⁴ Chang, “Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents,” 35-41.

Korea, due to it being in-tune with the global scene, is more in connection with and exposed to the global trends and flows hence it is more responsive in its attitude. For example, human rights and environmental policies gather some sort of reaction from both the society and the government. LGBTQ+ rights when considered as a component of human rights do have some acknowledgement from the society, however in an institutional level there are no laws or rhetoric that supports LGBTQ+ rights due to its conservative dominant culture and ideology. Even though it has a modern law system it still lacks in ensuring civil liberty for every component of its society.

China on the other hand, was aware that its post-Mao economy was stagnant and to be able to have a say in the global arena it needed a stronger economy. Thus, in 1978 Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reforms to improve and modernize the nation. China has opened up its market and allowed privatization. It did not endeavor to change its political regime like Korea, rather it pursued “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Its economic growth succeeded due to the support and initiations of the state through state-owned enterprises and utilizing foreign investment through “Special Economic Zones.”²¹⁵ The state is ruled by a single party hence the term “party-state,” with limited political pluralism and a rather strong authoritarianism it has a more guarded and controlled approach in its endeavors to join the global stage. Hence, compared to Korea it is not that susceptible and reactive toward global trends, its priority being its political legitimacy and hegemony. Also, China seems to have a more conservative attitude towards its culture where it emphasizes ‘Chineseness’ and uniqueness of Chineseness, where it does not allow transnational ideologies to syncretize with it as much as possible. As a way to ensure cultural and ideological

²¹⁵ Chang, “The Second Modern Condition?” 457.

dominance it utilizes surveillance and censorship. In this context, law is subordinated to party-state's control hence politicized, while discourse for rights is allowed in a selective manner and suppressed if it is against state ideology, such as queer rights.

Compressed modernity presents a way to make sense of the contradictions in these societies. For example, even though both societies have increasingly high education rates, they are inherently socially unequal due to the reasons that are illustrated above, although state ideologies and power structures in both countries are conservative and patriarchal favoring military (previously) and political elites their youth cultures are integrated to global cultures and has diverse tendencies. Hence, compressed modernity provides a framework for explaining how a genre with seemingly queer subjects/characters flourished and also how contents that deal with seemingly queer topics do not encourage people to politicize or change the discourse on LGBTQ+ in these countries. I think women who produce these contents for the majority part, do not regard these characters as 'queer,' as the definition that is established in the Introduction section, or rather queerness does not equate to a real-life identity hence politics in their eyes. Even though there are studies which conducted interviews with BL authors and fans, most of them do not show any particular interest in LGBTQ+ issues or representation, majority of them do not interact with gay people in real-life^{216 217} or they may perceive them how one perceives an actor from their favorite series and refer to them with their character's name in real life.

Their different paths of modernization as well as their motivations in joining the global economy in different paths, Korea by soft power, China by global manufacturing, reflected in their attitudes toward cultural industries especially BL.

²¹⁶ Zhang, "Loving Boys Twice as Much," 253-258.

²¹⁷ Kim, "Rethinking the Meaning of Boys Love in an Era of Feminism," 97-99.

China, never letting go of its authoritarian one-party rule and not adopting soft power as its main strategy for articulating to global economy like Korea does with its *Hallyu* strategy, has a stricter attitude toward BL. However, as it is discussed previously, it is implausible for a government to constantly repress its people through intolerant actions otherwise its consent by the public will be harmed. The implausibility of practicing constant oppression over people, and China being a part of the global market it, to a certain level, tolerates the existence of BL content but the level of tolerance is certainly lower than that of Korea's. Korea, on the other hand, with its electoral non-pluralistic democracy is not as controlling or authoritarian as China in this regard. It is more open to cultural export and freedom of expression without censorship and bans but it still has authoritarian reflexes due to its conservative roots.

Both nations are hybrid in their conducts as the conflicting components of their social, economic, and political compositions demonstrate. They possess modern and traditional, global and domestic, liberal and authoritarian aspects simultaneously. The social realities in these societies are layered as it was presented through women's position in these societies. The developments that were analyzed here did not happen in a linear order or in an organic or purposeful manner but rather most of the time they are contradictory and overlap with each other.

5.4 Nationalistic approaches

Nationalism in this context reveals itself in media industries of Korea and China. As it was touched upon from time to time in previous sections, media is used to enforce, build, or preserve national identities and traditional values of these nations. Also, both countries utilize media as a tool for building consent from the public. Korea also

utilizes media and cultural productions as a soft power/symbolic capital to promote its culture and commodify its cultural industries in the neoliberal market system. Korea's *Hallyu* which is a state-sponsored project as Choi Jung Bong illustrates, is a perfect example in that it aims to rebrand Korea's image in the global arena. China's commercially dynamic but ideologically restricted media and Korea's vigorous export-oriented yet highly controlled and curated media ecosystem generates political and economic power as well as promoting nationalistic ideologies of said governments.

For Korea, *Hallyu* represents its unique and ancient culture which reconstructs its image from a poverty-stricken 'backwater country' to an economic powerhouse of a country with hundreds or even thousands of years of history and culture. As well as a producer of modern cultural trends such as K-pop, K-drama, K-beauty which it uses as tools to break the Western domination in global media as well as rebranding Korea as a modern and innovational nation.²¹⁸ K-pop idols also function as cultural ambassadors who help promote Korean culture internationally and construct a national image according to the government's dominant ideology and how it wants to shape and present its own 'Koreannes.' K-Con, a music festival originated in the US, now being held in over ten countries, is organized by Korea's CJ ENM Entertainment Division which belongs to the *chaebol* conglomerate CJ Group. State-*chaebol* relationships are still intimate but now it is especially apparent in cultural industries. Entertainment divisions of *chaebol* companies encourage or force their K-pop idols to join K-Con in order to promote Korea overseas. Apart from constructing itself as a modern nation globally, Seungsook Moon (2017) suggests that Korea also uses "militarized modernity" to build a masculine, patriotic, and

²¹⁸ Kim, "Korean Culture and Society," 21.

modern national identity for its citizens.²¹⁹ Its colonial experiences under Japanese rule and on-going strained relations with North Korea provide appropriate grounds for a gendered, heteronormative patriarchal, hierarchal, conservative, and state-centric national identity in which women are branded as wise mothers and good wives²²⁰ and are assigned the duty of taking care of the wellbeing of family units. Korea also utilizes broadcasting media as tools for building a national identity. KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) and MBC (*Munhwa* Broadcasting Corporation) are affiliated with the state since KBS's board members are appointed by the President of Korea and MBC's majority of shares belong to The Foundation of Broadcast Culture which is established by the National Assembly and owned by the government. These affiliations may also indicate government intervention.²²¹ Hence, certain contents reinforcing masculine heteronormative ideologies are promoted and allowed more visibility compared to content that question or endanger the status quo.

In this context, the constructed national identities exclude or brand certain segments of society such as feminists²²² and queer/LGBTQ+ as anti-national,²²⁴ radical, 'Western-wannabe' or 'pro-Japanese.'²²⁵ As discussed previously, queerness is only allowed visibility in areas where it has market value and bring revenue however, it is depoliticized and faces backlash from conservative segments of the society from time to time. When queerness has visibility in mainstream media more

²¹⁹ Moon, "Militarized Modernity and Gendered Mass Mobilization."

²²⁰ Ibid., 59-60

²²¹ There are allegations that Blue House of Korea made demands on how Sewol Ferry Disaster was covered in KBS. See Ahn and Seok, "Stronger Evidence Found of Blue House Control over Broadcasters," and The Korea Herald, "[Editorial] KBS in Turmoil."

²²² The same situation is valid for China as well. Wu and Dong, "What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)?" and Huang, "Anti-Feminism," illustrate the case for Chinese anti-feminism in relation with nationalistic tendencies.

²²³ Jung, "A New Variation of Modern Prejudice," Kim, "The Resurgence and Popularization of Feminism in South Korea," Kim, "Misogyny for Male Solidarity."

²²⁴ In China's case anti-socialist as well, for further insight see Rofel, *Desiring China*, 96.

²²⁵ Henry, "Introduction," 9.

often than not characters who identify as gay themselves are used as comedic relief elements which reiterate homophobic/anti-LGBTQ+ prejudices.

Feminism in Korean context, on the other hand, faces anti-feminist movement by young Korean men especially in online spheres. #MeToo movement, or other feminist protests receive extreme backlash from men who are backed by state discourse and ideology. Also, national identity that is promoted and reinforced by the state is gendered and heteronormative in which Confucianism is extremely influential. Korea's construction of national identity and nationalism functions as a cultural defense mechanism against Western concepts such as feminism and queerness which cause moral panic, and also as a postcolonial reflex against Japanese influence.

For the Chinese case, media functions as a tool to govern over the cultural sphere. It pushes as well as constructs a national identity through media. China endeavors to reassert masculinization to the youth culture which more and more evolves toward an androgynous space where genders get intermingled which can be seen through *Douyin*²²⁶ videos in which extremely fashionable feminine men and masculine women play with gender in their self-expressions through fashion and make-up. According to Geng Song's (2022) study mentioned in Sheng Zou (2024), "effeminate male images gained increasing popularity which in turn triggered a masculinist response in official and public discourses."²²⁷ The discourse regarding the backlash toward feminine presenting men often includes nationalist sentiments and worries. Chinese discourse perceives men's bodily stamina in relation to a nation's strength hence anything that demonstrates men as 'weak' in comparison to their Western and Japanese counterparts creates panic and wakens nationalist

²²⁶ Chinese name for TikTok.

²²⁷ Song, "Little Fresh Meat," in Zou, "Sublimated Machismo," 340.

sentiments.²²⁸ Chinese biopolitics also have a role in politicizing youths, especially males, as it builds its dominant ideology on youth being political in the context of Communist Party and possessing energized young bodies.²²⁹ To protect and enforce its gendered ideology the Chinese government directly intervenes by way of law and through state institutions. In 2020, Chinese Ministry of Education published a proposal on ‘preventing the feminization of male youths’ in which it suggested several policies for enhancing ‘masculine energy’ of male youths through physical and mental health education.²³⁰ The aforementioned ban on the ‘effeminate men’ issued by the Chinese regulators in 2021 from TV and video sites aims to reestablish hegemonic masculinity in the media and cultural industries.²³¹ These cases illustrate China’s reflexes in protecting its ideological national identity as well as attempts at shaping it by force. According to Zou (2024), there is a hypermasculine response as a reaction to feminization of males and androgynous aesthetics in Chinese youth and cultural spheres. He presents Chinese hip-hop as an example which is intrinsically heterosexual and offers a space where hypermasculine agenda can be spread from both the lyrics and the styles of the rappers.²³² In this sense, it can be seen that China has an extremely gendered nationalism in which masculine men are associated with strength of the nation, whereas women are positioned as, again, “wise mothers and good wives” and feminism, feminization of men, and queerness create moral panic.

Although soft power diplomacy is among China’s agenda, it strategically protects the ‘Chineseness’ that the state has curated and established first and foremost, rather than prioritizing producing symbolic capital in the international and

²²⁸ Ibid., 340.

²²⁹ Xiao, *Youth Economy, Crisis, and Reinvention in Twenty-First Century China*. In Zou, “Sublimated Machismo,” 340.

²³⁰ Ibid., 340.

²³¹ Ibid., 340.

²³² Ibid., 341.

global arena which would require a degree of fusion with the popular (youth) culture, with its un-Confucian and Western notions, around the globe. The West's 'corrupting' influences such as freedom of expression, feminism, and sexual freedom, and liberal democracy are seen as harmful notions against which the true Chinese culture must be defended against. In this context, China utilizes media as its tool where it promotes Chinese values and controls the discourse against a youth sexual culture which shows liberal and Western influences through promoting patriotic and historical content²³³ as well as its strict regulation of platforms: from TV channels to social media and streaming platforms.

Chinese state heavily curates media and cultural industries through platformization by which it shapes what is normal and allowed, which contents are circulated and how. Zhang (2024) illustrates how Jinjiang and Tencent act as extensions of state in censoring content, banning access to certain works if they are deemed as violating the rules of censor enforced by the government.²³⁴ Queer aesthetics are allowed in a very limited and subtle form for the sake of market demand and revenue for companies such as Tencent, however once it starts to become popular and attract attention and not remain as something that niche and an interest of a certain segment of society it is immediately subdued and crushed. This illustrates the state's negotiation between the market and its ideology.

As a part of their nationalistic agendas and ideologies both Korea and China consider and promote concepts such as queerness, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism as Western, which in a sense positions these concepts as anti-traditional. LGBTQ+ people's existence in both contexts disturbs the existing binary gender system. One of the most important aspects where the order is disturbed is the family institution.

²³³ Keane, *Created in China*, 116.

²³⁴ Zhang, "Boys' Love in the Chinese Platformization of Cultural Production," 1.

Both China and Korea consider heterosexual nuclear families as the core of society in which heteronormative, patriarchal, and hierarchical hegemonic order is maintained. Especially in Korea, there is a conservative/Christian rhetoric along with cultural, traditional, and political conservatism which denounce queerness and queer identities as anti-Korean and anti-family.²³⁵ Similar conceptions of feminism and queerness exist in China as well. Conservative segments and the state regard queerness and feminism as anti-Chinese, anti-national, Western ideas that are morally corrupting the nation.

5.5 Queer and feminist theories

The emergence of BL, its components, how it is constructed, and the themes it engages with all relevant to queer theory in its essence. In this section, I will try to analyze BL from queer and feminist academic perspectives since in the case of BL, Queer Theory is intertwined with Feminist Theory for the most part hence, it is indeed difficult to separate the two. BL is defined by many as a genre of fiction which is ‘by women for women.’ Thus, it is important for our discussion to understand the position and conditions of women in Chinese and Korean societies through the lenses of queer and feminist theories which I believe will provide a clarifying framework in the context of BL.

It is argued by some that BL emerged as a response to oppressive gender roles and expectation placed on women (and men)²³⁶ especially in countries that have conservative backgrounds such as Korea and China. BL is seen as a space that offers women to explore their sexual desires and fantasies in a way that they were not

²³⁵ Na et al., “The South Korean Gender System,” 359-361.

²³⁶ See Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender,’” 76-89, Kwon, “The Past, Present, and Future of Boys Love (BL) Cultures in East Asia,” 102-109, Nagaike, “Do Heterosexual Men Dream of Homosexual Men?” 204.

allowed to in society and would be frowned upon. In the Chinese and Korean cases, as it was discussed briefly under compressed modernity, their rapid economic advances propelled them into a speedy societal construction in order to strengthen their nation from all aspects, where they defined what being a ‘modern society’ entailed for them. Both Korean and Chinese states intervened with people’s sexual lives through their ‘family planning’ policies²³⁷ which greatly illustrates how they engaged with biopolitics in building their modern nations. They educated people on how to behave sexually, engage with sexuality, in China’s case even legally interfering on the number of children people can have (One Child Policy 1979-2015), while establishing the union of heterosexual couples by marriage as the core unit of society. Their nation-building projects was inspired by the desire of becoming important players in the global area and also becoming strong not only economically but also culturally and socially. On the surface, this endeavor provided women with more rights in the eyes of law than they previously had. However, in practice women were still bound by conservative traditions and Confucian mindset with regards to chastity and fidelity to one’s spouse and by extension his family as the highest virtue for women.²³⁸ It was and is still not an easy feat to dismantle and transform something that had roots for hundreds or even thousands of years in a society. As it is illustrated by Deuchler (1992)’s argument in Choe (2006) that even among other East Asian countries that share Confucian tradition Korea stands as a country holding out on one of the strictest forms of Confucianism.²³⁹ There was not enough time for these concepts of equality between genders to be assimilated into these societies internally.

²³⁷See Chen, “Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change in Contemporary China,” Ho et al., “Sex with Chinese Characteristics, Zarafonitis, *Sexuality in a Changing China*, 32-51, Cho, “Making the ‘Modern’ Family.”

²³⁸ Manek, “Confucian Historical Narratives and Misogynic Culture in South Korea,” 54.

²³⁹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*. In Choe, “Modernization, Gender Roles, and Marriage Behavior in South Korea,” 293.

Increasing interactions with societies around the globe initiated by the economic relationships also brought an influx of new ideologies from the West. While women gained legal rights, not much has changed socially and culturally since the practices did not seem to cause any tangible changes in women's real life. Especially expectations on women remained the same: to be pure, chaste, devoted, and obedient. State ideology and the discourse it shaped and promoted was still heteronormative, gendered, and patriarchal.

For Korean women, already existing Confucian norms which were solidified by being established as an official state-ideology during the *Joseon* period were further reinforced during Japanese colonial rule and its "wise mothers good wives" rhetoric. Hence, when Victorian teachings of domesticity and piety were brought over by American Protestant women through missionaries a discourse where they can be integrated into already existed. In the Korean context, Protestant Christianity has an important role in strengthening the already existing conservative notions in society. Even today, anti-queer/LGBTQ+ and anti-feminist rhetoric are produced and supported majorly by these segments who have negotiated domestic Korean cultural conservatism with religious conservatism. However, Korea being more open to global norms and outside influences both economically and socially, what has been labeled as 'liberal, anti-national' ideologies started to find response from Korean women who started to receive higher education in higher rates. They started to bring concepts such as feminist discourse, sexual awareness, and gender inequality, etc. to the forefront as social issues. Neoliberal order established women as desiring consuming subjects. As a byproduct of this new economic order age of marriage increased since living expenses has also increased incredibly, owning property got harder, two-income for a household became a necessity for the majority, hence it

started to take longer for couples to establish themselves and feel secure enough to start a family. Having their own money and time for themselves without the immediate obligation to marry and undertake the responsibility of a household, women started to enjoy hobbies and consume both cultural and material products of their own choice. In this context, Korea having a vibrant emerging youth culture integrated to other youth cultures globally helped BL's crossover from Japan to Korea. Toward the 1990s, sexual culture has also transformed. Sex was no longer seen as just an act performed for procreation or something exclusive to married couples. The dating culture has flourished and pre-marital sex was not regarded as a taboo anymore. However, I would like to remind the concept of compressed modernity once more because all these changes and transformations did not necessarily entail Confucian sexual and moral rhetoric to be dismantled or for it to disappear into these new liberal and 'radical' practices. Hence, the struggle continued for women while they enjoyed a neoliberal freedom at the same time still being bound by conservative conscious, practices, norms, and traditions of their societies, still being disadvantaged against men whether in job opportunities, wages, or what they are judged for compared to men, since men are not subjected to the same moral standards and expectations as women are. I think this struggle for co-existence by conservative dominant culture and liberal youth cultures in these cultures is what made BL possible.

In the context of China, Chinese women were experiencing the restricting effects of Confucian heteropatriarchy just like Korean women were experiencing them. While on the outside the Communist/Socialist revolution seemed to be liberating women, it certainly did to some degree by bringing a break from patriarchal and familialist sexual culture by outlawing or demolishing old practices

such as polygyny, concubinage, etc., and promoting equality between men and women before the law, it also brought restrictions of itself. Also, it did not/could not entirely transform the customs of the people or abolish patriarchal practices deeply rooted in the culture. Under the Maoist rule during the 1970s, Chinese society was going through an “anti-sexual” public culture.²⁴⁰ Public sexual displays were taboo and romance was considered a dangerous bourgeois affectation.²⁴¹ The emergence of *danmei* culture falls back on youth sexual revolution of the 1990s. In the 1990s, with the effects of open-market economy, globalization whether voluntarily or involuntarily, introduction of liberal concepts from the West also resulted in the rise of youth-oriented media. Youth magazines, romance novels marketed towards teens from Taiwan, television series imported from Japan, and pirated movies from Hollywood brought the theme of romanticized sexuality into China which participated in the rise of youth sexual culture.²⁴² In the context of China, premarital sex for love and feelings started being acknowledged and accepted, some, especially the middle class, regarded the concept as a sign of modernization. Hence, it is not unexpected for BL, focusing on love between men which was something unconventional, transgressive, defying to the norms, and also allowing the repressed women a fresh venue to explore their sexual fantasies, sexualities, and play with gender roles to flourish in this context.^{243 244}

As it was illustrated previously, the three countries that are important for BL Japan, Korea, and China all share a Confucian sociocultural background. Chinese and Korean women just like Japanese women were repressed by the highly gendered

²⁴⁰ Farrer, “Youth and Sexuality in China,” 151.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 150-159.

²⁴² Ibid., 154.

²⁴³ Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender’”

²⁴⁴ Shen, “The Reasons for the Popularity of ‘Boys Love’ Culture in China,” 146.

and heteropatriarchal order of Confucianism and the traditional norms, mores, and practices of their societies. I think that they were united in their desire for ‘joining life’ as much as men did without the restraints of household responsibilities, wifely, and motherly duties, and moral judgement inflicted upon them. When their status started to change in society, when they started to join the work force and earned their own money as well as time to themselves, when the notion of sex changed from a duty for procreation to something that can be enjoyed and be done out of desire, and when they started to realize the very basis of their societies resting upon gender inequality, BL provided an outlet for them to release their oppressions,²⁴⁵ experiment, experience, and play with gender and sexuality.

I am of the opinion that BL’s emergence and spread can be explained by the sum of all we have discussed here: exploring and experimenting with sexuality, thrill of defying strict rules and roles of society, of government censor, an escape from the social realities of gender suppression and the avoidance of sexuality, and playing with sexuality. In this sense BL enables women to have erotic agency without the objectification of women themselves. BL presented a way to have fun, be as imaginative as one can be without having to give account in a female-centered space. It also enabled a world where contrary to everywhere else, female desire²⁴⁶ reigned. Things that have been reserved to men such as sexual fantasies, freely experiencing sexuality, consuming and producing pornography, and engaging in sexual scenarios are re-appropriated through BL for women. From a feminist perspective, as Zhang (2016) posits, BL empowers women by enabling them to turn a voyeuristic gaze upon men.²⁴⁷ Through this voyeuristic gaze they play with and dismantle the

²⁴⁵ Kwon, “The Past, Present, and Future of Boys Love (BL) Cultures in East Asia,” 102.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much,” 262-263.

patriarchal gender constructions of their societies. Female gaze in this context establishes women as subjects rather than objects of BL. Women are the ones who look, desire, and narrate the story hence their desires are satisfied, their choice of narration which focuses on the emotional aspects as well rather than solely on the carnal desires being satisfied like heterosexual porn that is catered towards heterosexual men²⁴⁸ and created for the male gaze. According to Zhang (2016), through the use of BL narrative, women also “express their own desires for idealized heterosexual relationships.”²⁴⁹ At the same time, from the perspective of queer theory, heteronormative relationships and, binary gender roles are dismantled in favor of homoerotic and homosexual relationships.²⁵⁰ In the queer context, BL also provides a space where women explore their desires and imagine intimacy scenarios while distancing themselves from female objectification and real life gender roles by which they, as women, would have been judged for if their main character were to be women and they were the ones to experience what their male characters are experiencing. Hence, by displacement of female body, projection and fantasy became rather liberating for women.²⁵¹ Even though, BL uses the *uke-seme*²⁵² framework which is criticized for reproducing patriarchal gender hierarchy in which *uke* is associated with females because of his feminine traits²⁵³ and also his ‘passive’ and obedient position, it, in fact, challenges binary gender roles by reconstructing masculinity in any desired way such as assigning both feminine and masculine traits to the characters irrespective of their roles as *seme* or *uke* therefore disturbing the traditional gender roles. Heteronormative discourse for relationships is also disturbed

²⁴⁸ Otomo, “Politics of Utopia,” 149.

²⁴⁹ Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much,” 255.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 255-257

²⁵¹ Otomo, “Politics of Utopia,” 147-148.

²⁵² Top/active- Bottom/receiver

²⁵³ Pagliassotti, “Better Than Romance?” In Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much,” 251.

in that women create new relationship dynamics which they cannot find in traditional heterosexual narratives. Both characters in BL fiction are constructed as emotionally equal. Women create narratives by bringing two sides of a relationship to same footing, where one side is not judged, restricted, or labeled as ‘weak and emotional’ but rather experiences a “pure love”²⁵⁴ with an equal, unlike real life experiences or traditional heterosexual narratives.

Creating and consuming BL can be considered in itself as a feminist concept because women create spaces of resistance in socioculturally restrictive discourses. From this perspective, BL, as a cultural production by women for women, becomes a space where women explore their fantasies, challenge heteropatriarchal order, and dismantle gender constructions and gender roles. In this line of thought that takes gender as being played with, different traits being assigned to a certain gender proves Judith Butler (1990)’s²⁵⁵ theory of gender not being fixed but rather something shaped by culturally enforced norms and something that is “performed.” Women produce, share, consume, and discuss BL in online platforms hence create a cultural realm in which they play with gender and gender roles, deconstruct heteronormative norms, and they build “queer public spheres”²⁵⁶ through digital communities. According to Yang and Xu (2016) these platforms are “queer public spheres” in that sociopolitical issues such as gender and sexuality are also discussed along with BL content.²⁵⁷

Another aspect to consider in terms of BL as an act of feminist resistance is BL being pornography ‘for women by women.’ Rio Otomo (2015) regards BL as

²⁵⁴ Shen, “The Reasons for the Popularity of ‘Boys Love’ Culture in China,” 144.

²⁵⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

²⁵⁶ Yang and Xu, “*Danmei*, Xianqing, and the Making of a Queer Online Public Sphere in China,” 255.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

pornography that defies and counteracts historically misogynistic construction of pornography that is catered toward heterosexual men. Women as consumers and creators of sexual fantasy use pornography as a channel to express their sexual fantasies. Hence BL in this context becomes a pornographic medium where women express those sexual fantasies. Women's inclusion and laying their claim to the genre transforms it to be more inclusive and liberates it from its innate misogyny. According to Otomo (2015), despite the wide assumption that beautiful boys adorning BL are fetish objects, BL's aim is not possessing the body and it is not obsessed with bodies. Rather, it displaces the gendered body of the reader and tells a story in which the reader is everywhere and experiences everything.²⁵⁸ Unlike pornography that is tailored to heterosexual male enjoyment, BL does not confine eroticism to sexual organs where "a woman's sexual pleasure is depicted solely in close-up while the men is only visible by his sexual organ."²⁵⁹ BL depicts the sexual pleasures of both lovers²⁶⁰ which again unlike heterosexual narratives creates an equal footing in terms of power between the lovers. Hence, eroticism and mutual romantic attachment are inseparable in BL narratives.²⁶¹ BL does not carry "the ghost of patriarchy"²⁶² in it, it does not reiterate patriarchal tropes that make up traditional heterosexual male-oriented porn. Women sincerely enjoy and create actual sexual fantasies without reducing romanticism or eroticism to the physicality and mechanics of two bodies. From a feminist point of view these are BL's most significant contributions to women's resistance to traditional patriarchal and misogynist heterosexual discourse that reduces them to object of pleasure, disregards emotional

²⁵⁸ Otomo, "Politics of Utopia," 147.

²⁵⁹ Nagaike and Aoyama, "What Is Japanese 'BL Studies?'" 123.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 123.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 123.

²⁶² Otomo, "Politics of Utopia," 149.

aspects of a relationship between two ‘equals.’ Readers/writers of BL do not wish to own or possess the beautiful boys but rather “simulate [their] metamorphoses which [they] undergo through the love [they] experience, who become powerful when [they have] come to embody the pleasure [they were] first forced to learn.”²⁶³

Fujimoto (2015) touches upon the concept of “girls dressed as boys” in *shōjo* manga regarding to the trope girls posing as boys in order to achieve social status or take on a social role that would not have been possible for them as women.²⁶⁴ The basis of this trope can be read as gender inequality. By ‘becoming a boy’ and assuming a male identity, they defy the conventional gender roles. The nature of this defiance is of course open to discussion since they try to achieve their goals in society not as girls but becoming boys, a position of privilege. What is more interesting is the fact that these heroines abandon their disguises when they fall in love. They want to perform as boys and not to be seen as a girl in the society. At the same time, they want to be seen as a girl in front of their love interests. The heroine only accepts and affirms her femininity when she falls in love, when she is experiencing romantic feelings.²⁶⁵ The male appearance for the *shōjo* heroine is a symbol of her denial of female sexuality and her reluctance for positively accepting and embracing her female gender. Hence, it was argued that by projecting sexual attributes to the figure of a boy, which is assumed to be essentially non-sexual, the *shōjo* heroine becomes sexually liberated. This, according to Fujimoto (2015), stems from the inherent drive to escape from being forced to fit into a defined ‘female gender.’ In connection with this, there is also the trope “boys dressed as girls,” which refers to girls/women ridding themselves from their passive positions where they

²⁶³ Ibid., 150.

²⁶⁴ Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender,’” 80-81.

²⁶⁵ Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender,’” 81.

have witnessed things done to them in heteronormative narratives and attaining an active position by using male characters as tools for doing things to others.

In this context, boys (the main characters) act according to the inner desires and whims of girls, boys are no longer used as a disguise for girls and provide an escape for girls from their sexual and gender identities. Now, through boys, girls play and experiment with sexuality and gender, hence boys in BL showcase ‘feminine attitudes, mannerisms,’²⁶⁶ in-depth and genuine displays of emotion and experience pure love. This, in my opinion is also illustrated by how in BL, boys experience romance as how a girl (*shōjo*) would if she were to be completely free of judgement, since a girl would not possess the freedom and power to do as she desired without judgements of her morality and chastity. The same freedom that was afforded to men to experience love and sexuality however they desired was not allowed for women then and now still.

From Fujimoto (2015) it can be gathered that the reason “girls dressed as boys” genealogy of *shōjo*, which had blended into or maybe helped create *shōnen’ai*, emerged was the reflexes that stemmed from the frustrations of gender oppression, “escap[ing] the look that sees women as sex objects,”²⁶⁷ the desire to defy these oppressions and exploring sexuality while at the same time being a little afraid innately to do so. Girls disguised themselves as boys which would provide them with a ‘free-pass’ to explore and experiment what they dearly wished but were afraid of at the same time. However, Fujimoto (2015) argues that modern day *yaoi* and BL are

²⁶⁶ This also illustrates how ‘masculine men’ are expected to behave and when a man embraces his emotional side, openly values the experience of love rather than the sexual union these are considered ‘feminine.’ In this sense, BL provides an escape from the dictated masculinity and expectations that stem from this binary gendered system for men as well as for women. For further insight on this aspect see Kazumi Nagaike, “Do Heterosexual Men Dream of Homosexual Men,” in *Boys Love Manga and beyond : History, Culture, and Community in Japan* (University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 189-209.

²⁶⁷ Kaneda, “Manga dōjinshi.” In Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender,’” 86-87

products of a different genealogy, namely the aforementioned “boys dressed as girls.”²⁶⁸ These protagonists seem no longer to be representing “a projection of the *shōjo*’s inner self,”²⁶⁹ they are not disguises for women to experience the world but rather they are tools for women to really play with gender and sexuality, achieving “amusementization of gender.”²⁷⁰ “*Yaoi* is a re-interpretation of *shōnen* manga from a *shōjo* manga point of view.”²⁷¹ In this vein, it can be said that the workings and motivations behind literary fiction of male-male love have evolved from *shōnen*’*ai* to *yaoi* to BL and analysis of *shōnen*’*ai* works versus those of *yaoi* or BL from the mid-1990s or later, thus will differ. It also follows that as the genre itself changed and evolved the analyses defining their characteristics have also evolved and changed.²⁷²

Fujimoto (2015)’s point of view provides some sort of a reconciliation between the different views regarding to emergence of BL: one of the most argued view is that women create and engage in BL because they are afraid of experiencing sexuality in their own gender, by themselves hence BL is a safe space for them to explore. Another argument is women who suffer from gender suppression escape from gender inequality by identifying themselves with boys who has had more freedom to ‘live.’ There are also views maintaining that through BL women create a gender-blended world in which they can play with or disregard gender and traditional power dynamics altogether. In this context, when Fujimoto (2015) draws attention to the evolution of the genre and the motivations behind it, it captures the fluidity of life and women’s experiences. It seems possible that when the genre first started to

²⁶⁸ Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender,’” 82.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 82.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 85.

²⁷¹ Kawahara, “Manga to ren’*ai*/otaku,” in Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender,’” 86.

²⁷² Ibid., 87.

emerge it really was an experiment for women to channel their frustrations, a thrilling experience of defying the norms and doing something ‘transgressive.’ But in time, as women gained more awareness of their position in their respective societies and in the world, as they started to struggle more for equality, as they reconciled with their sexuality and fantasies, the purpose of BL have changed accordingly. It slowly became something through which women started to play with gender and the norms of society, also expressing their fantasies, namely: pornography. However, pornography in this context should not be mistaken with the traditional misogynistic pornography that serves heterosexual male fantasy in which the act of having sex, the sexual organs themselves, and the act of possession is at the center. Rather, “the BL reader is aroused by the image of a beautiful boy in the text but more so by the relationship he has and the romance he experience with the other person.”²⁷³ According to Anthony Giddens (1992)’s concept of “pure relationship,” male-male lovers became symbols of pure relationship and true romance since their relationships do not depend on any exterior support or motivation²⁷⁴ unlike women who are burdened by the expectations of childbirth, domestic duties, and much more in their relationships.

From a feminist point of view as much as BL afforded freedom to explore and experiment with sexuality, playing with gender in the current neoliberal and patriarchal structure presents a more nuanced picture. Gill (2007) argues that even though current discourse emphasizes freedom of choice, empowerment, and self-expression for women these remain within the constraints of consumerism.²⁷⁵ Both Zarafonetis (2017) and Gill (2007) illustrate how neoliberal discourse and state

²⁷³ Otomo, “Politics of Utopia,” 150.

²⁷⁴ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*. In McLelland and Welker, “An Introduction to ‘Boys Love’ in Japan,” 18.

²⁷⁵ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 147-166

policies reshape gender norms, reproduce patriarchal structures under the guise of empowerment, being modern, and having sexual agency as long as self-surveillance is exercised.²⁷⁶ ²⁷⁷ Gill (2007) refers this current era as “postfeminist” in which the message of empowerment is pumped from every possible media while patriarchal expectations are reintroduced with a different packaging.²⁷⁸ Gill (2007) illustrates different ways that this is managed and normalized. One of the tools relevant to our discussion is the emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline in postfeminist media culture while personal choice is kept being stressed. For women, femininity is a performance which requires self-monitoring and self-surveying. Women are presented as autonomous agents making all their choices freely in order to ‘please themselves’ and ‘be themselves’ and this notion has permeated every aspect of life. Hence, whatever women do they are “simply following their own desires to feel good” even those actions re-introduces and normalizes patriarchal tendencies.²⁷⁹ However, through content intended for men and for women sexual difference between men and women are being reasserted, masculinity is presented as libidinous and powerful while femininity is being defined as a bodily property, a fit and sexy body is what defines femininity in the current discourse.²⁸⁰ Thus, in such a discourse where notions that feminism once waged war on are now being promoted as acts of self-improvement and being autonomous through female-empowerment are sold as a lifestyle which objectifies and commodifies femininity.

Urban middle-class Chinese women perceive expressing their sexualities by dating and also having pre-marital sex as an indicator of being modern.²⁸¹ However,

²⁷⁶ Zarafonetis, *Sexuality in a Changing China*.

²⁷⁷ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149, 151, 153, 154.

²⁷⁸ Probyn, *New Traditionalism and Post-Feminism* in Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 162.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 151-154.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 149-150.

²⁸¹ Zarafonetis, ““At fifteen, we know nothing!””

this is a gendered freedom in that men are freer than women and if women do not self-surveil, do not consider their image they face repercussions hence they must manage their bodies, desires, and reputations responsibly. For example, they are free to move in with their partners and have pre-marital sex with them but the expectation is that they marry with their partners. If they break up or if they do not marry at all that is something 'shameful' and puts women in a hard position.²⁸² In this context women's autonomy of choice is recognized when they perform patriarchal norms by choosing to perform them for themselves on the surface. They are perceived as autonomous consumers, in this context they can consume BL as autonomous consumers in a market of desire where their desire is commodified by platforms and the discourse created both by postfeminist discourse and state-ideology discourse.

In this framework along with state discourse that create neoliberal autonomous consumers out of women, the opportunity to commercialize what was a liberating hobby may have also increased the participation to this cultural industry. As well as it being allowed to exist by Chinese and Korean states since through platformization these cultural productions bring revenues, create soft power, and also help define what is normal and what is not. Also, when the sociopolitical and the economic conditions are further analyzed it can be seen that consumerism may have a part to play in the rise of BL as well. The desire to consume, to being able to consume as a token of power and status started to replace and transform the old social structures. As it was discussed earlier, consuming came to be the symbol of power for both Chinese and Korean societies as a result of their economies being integrated into global open-market system and transforming into neoliberal capitalist societies. The joy and satisfaction from having the power to obtain whatever one

²⁸² Zaratfonetis, "'All They Want Is a Sexy Ayi,'" 115.

desires along with more liberal perceptions of gender, sex, sexuality, and interrelationships created a different social discourse for the generations to come. Women struggling for liberation from their assigned roles of house wives and mothers, struggling with societies heavily constructed upon heteropatriarchal gender norms and customs also started to experiment with and explore their sexualities openly. They also struggled against the stigma of chastity and purity that were placed on them. Now, women who earn their own money and time for themselves can choose to not marry and not to give birth to a child, can spend their money for their self-pleasure such as purchasing art books and the merchandise of BL works or the content itself.

I argue that BL provided women with roundabout ways to defy and challenge the current structure of society. It also provided them with a space to “play with sexuality” and gender without any judgements or restrictions like Fujimoto (2015) suggests. One of the things the *seme-uke* framework provides actually is this.

Masculinity and femininity, in a sense, were severed from gender norms. Protagonists, both being male, possess different qualities that are usually associated with a certain gender. However, in the context of BL, they carry a gender ambiguity to them. To illustrate better, a mafia boss or a strict and affluent CEO, both of which signify status and power and associated with “masculinity” in a heteronormative society’s traditional gender framework, can be the *uke* or an *uke* can be a ‘power bottom’ being in control of every aspect of the sexual relationship. In recent years both Chinese and Korean BL started to produce characters that differed from ‘weak, fragile, emotional, physically feminine-looking’ *uke* and ‘intimidating, physically robust, masculine, possessive and showing little emotion’ *seme* to both physically strong, masculine-presenting characters or a *seme* presented as physically superior,

muscular, holding a highly respected job having a bubbly/cheerful personality and highly emotional, while the *uke* being emotionally distant and aggressive. One way to read the use of these tactics may be the effort in putting *seme* and *uke* in equal footing regarding to power balance.²⁸³ The shift in the original framework where *seme* is coded as the masculine and *uke* as the feminine seem to suggest the shifting of the power dynamics and perhaps the increasing gender and sexual consciousness of the writers. Since, this framework which associated ‘physical weakness, emotionality, passive attitudes, and being sexually recipient’ with femininity while associating ‘physical strength, aggressiveness, power, and being sexually a giver’ with masculinity it was seen as reiterating the misogyny and the gender norms of the real world.²⁸⁴ According to Xu and Yang (2022), *danmei* especially paid effort to “present gender equality and love between equals.”²⁸⁵ However, it is important to note that this endeavor does not mean this framework and pairing choices have completely disappeared. Popular webtoons from Lezhin such as Painter of the Night (Yahwacheop), Jinx, The Ghost’s Nocturne, The Hounds of Sisyphus etc. are some of the works that illustrate the ‘strong masculine *seme*’ and ‘fragile emotional *uke*’ trope that still continues. This illustrates the hybrid nature of the BL fandom both in regards to women who consume and create them, since some women consume and create BL purely for entertainment and as a form of pornography not caring about these dynamics, and the variety of content that is being produced as a result.

²⁸³ The *danmei Mo Dao Zu Shi* (Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation), the webtoons Wet Sand, Green Light, Ennead, Best Buddy, etc., illustrates the point when the dynamics and physical appearances of the characters are taken into account.

²⁸⁴ Kim, “Rethinking the Meaning of Boys Love in an Era of Feminism,” 97-99, Xi, “Masculinities in Chinese Boys’ Love Stories,” 5-8, Pagliassotti, “Better Than Romance?” 59-83.

²⁸⁵ Xu and Yang, “Between BL and Slash,” 27.

The next section will conclude the discussion that is presented throughout this work and will answer the questions of the motivation behind BL's emergence and the different responses given to BL by Chinese and Korean states.



CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The discussion under the theoretical framework has illustrated that even though many elements help explain the phenomenon of Boys Love media, it is hard to pin one single approach as the sole explanation or reason. There are two main questions that I have posited that I would like to try and answer in an orderly manner:

- 1) What was the reason behind BL's emergence, popularity, and the similar responses from Korean and Chinese societies, especially from women?
- 2) Even though there are similar responses to and demands for BL by Korean and Chinese societies what is the reason for the different responses by the Korean and Chinese states?

For the first question it is important to acknowledge the cultural, historical, and political ties among Japan, Korea, and China. A China-centric past where Chinese was the lingua franca and Confucianism was a core value in which morals and ethics as well as code for statecraft for hundreds of years helped create common values between these nations. Also, geographical proximity provided cultural exchange among these countries which again strengthened sociocultural ties among them. Even though each nation had different journeys, different interactions, and influences that shaped them some core values have remained. Importance of family, hierarchical order of society, collectivist mindset, patriarchal and gendered social norms illustrate these shared 'East Asian values.' Women in these societies shared or suffered from same restrictions and expectations placed on them by their states and societies. Historically, education was reserved for males while women most of the time were able to receive the most basic education if at all. In certain periods

women's only space for existence were the house and household duties. Child rearing, supporting and respecting both their husbands, their husband's family and their own families were some of the natural and indisputable duties of women. Private matters such as experiencing sexuality and erotic emotions again were reserved for men where it was normal for them to take care of outside of their marriage. Until around the 20th century marriage for most of the time was not perceived to be a union of two people in love, but rather a duty towards the families of both sides and later on to the nation. Hence, sex was seen as something for procreation in marriage and something for passion and love outside of marriage. People most of the time were not able to marry with the person they truly loved but with people that had provided some sort of benefit which made the union more transactional.²⁸⁶ Men had the freedom to seek love and affection outside of their marriages whereas women did not have the same freedom and were judged heavily, even ostracized. Of course, I do not and cannot claim the situation being the same for every couple in these nations, however I believe it still has some hold for majority of the women to varying degrees.

The patriarchal and hierarchical order based on Confucian morals created a shared conservative inclination in the construction of these societies in which women were trapped and restricted. It is also important to note that Japan,²⁸⁷ Korea, and China all experienced what can be described as 'compressed modernity.'²⁸⁸ In these

²⁸⁶ Ho et al., "Sex with Chinese Characteristics," Maynes, "Korean Perceptions of Chastity, Gender Roles, and Libido," Jeffreys and Haiqing Yu, *Sex in China*, 32-39.

²⁸⁷ Chang Kyung-Sup does not discuss Japan as experiencing compressed modernity however it can be argued that Japan carries some of the qualities as well.

²⁸⁸ Chang, "Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents," and Chang, "The Second Modern Condition?"

countries, economic developments, reforms on education, rights, and family planning, etc. have introduced modern practices in a top-to-down manner without a conscious demand from the majority hence, while in material aspects these nations thrive and seem to have achieved modernity, in sociocultural aspects they (Korea and China) seem to be in a period of negotiation where old and traditional values, views, and practices co-exist with modern, neoliberal, capitalistic notions and practices. Raymond Williams' three layered approach on culture (dominant, residual, and emergent) also illustrates this situation. In this context, women while gaining equal rights in the eyes of law, being liberated from their sole roles as housewives, housework as their main occupation that is recognized by the society, and the house itself, or to put it better, from housework being their only legitimate choice of labor even though it was and still is unpaid, started to join to the work force where they have variety of choices in regards to work and receive payment for their labor, and started to be perceived as individuals that earn and spend their own money on whatever they desired. The global interaction with the rest of the world also brought in an influx of new concepts, ideas, ideologies which created an emergent youth culture as well as culture of women.

When all of these conditions are considered, BL can be placed as a cultural product of the 'culture of women.' Its emergence stems from the needs and resistance of women. It has aspects that engage with queer theory, it has queer motifs and even actions depicted in its content. However, I posit that its motivation is inherently not queer. Hence, it is open to discussion whether it can be actually regarded as queer literature because BL does not acknowledge its subjects as queer or gay people. As it does not tell the story of "self-identified queer/gay men," writers do not consider their characters as gay, homosexual, or queer, they do not associate them with any

queer/LGBTQ+ identity. Homosexuality or LGBTQ+ are not recognized or acknowledged in BL narratives. According to Ishida (2015), when self-identified gays do enter the BL narrative, they are never protagonists but side characters who are depicted as “the deviant, pathological other,”²⁸⁹ and more often than not they are one-sided, stereotypical characters utilized for comedic relief. Rather, BL narrative’s protagonists are “self-identified heterosexual men who happened to fall in love with other men and have sex with them.”²⁹⁰ He also brings attention to homophobic tropes and statements appearing in BL content.

In the same line, Mizoguchi (2000)’s argument in Nagaike and Aoyama (2015) is used to illustrate how BL narratives reflect that female readers do not want to “identify with ‘real’ gay men, even in fantasy” and it is this separateness that appeals to women in the first place.²⁹¹ Hori Akiko (2010), concludes in her discussion on BL that “...[BL] do not tell stories about gay men but rather about love between heterosexual men” hence it is not aimed toward gay men as a genre²⁹² it is a space created for women by women and produces content aimed toward the desires and demands of women. Nagaike and Aoyama (2015) include BL artist and critic Nobi Nobita’s comments on the topic. She places males depicted in BL fantasies as different from men in reality. According to Nobi: “...these characters are constructed as artifacts which correspond to female images of men... Thus, [real] gay men do not need to be distressed by these female fantasies of male homosexuality. [Real] gay men are not [directly involved parties] in female [BL] fantasies.”²⁹³

²⁸⁹ Ishida, “‘Hottoite Kudasai’ to Iu Hyōmei o Megutte,” in Nagaike and Aoyama, “What Is Japanese ‘BL Studies?’” 124.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 124.

²⁹¹ Mizoguchi, “Homofobikku na Homo, Ai Yue no Reipu,” in Nagaike and Aoyama, “What Is Japanese ‘BL Studies?’” 124.

²⁹² Hori, “Yaoi wa Gei Sabetsu Ka?” in Nagaike and Aoyama, “What Is Japanese ‘BL Studies?’” 124.

²⁹³ Nobi, *Otona wa wakatte kurenai*. In Nagaike and Aoyama, “What Is Japanese ‘BL Studies?’” 124.

This approach by a BL creator and critic illustrates my point in this topic. The emergence of BL, its production and consumption have feminist motivation rather than queer since BL does not see itself as queer literature, does not include any LGBTQ+ or actual homosexual context in its narrative, it does not perceive or create its characters as gay men. It does have queer practices, it disturbs heteronormative and heterosexual order, subverts gender norms and dynamics, and displaces female desire onto males. Yet, it does not acknowledge its subjects as queer/LGBTQ+, it does not recognize such discourse, has homophobic tendencies, it does not concern with representation or politics in queer sense. As a side note, the famous ‘yaoi debate’ of Japan also illustrates that Japanese gay men do not identify with the characters in BL, condemning female BL writers and fans for “entertaining themselves through the commodification and consumption of...gay male characters.”²⁹⁴ This illustrates the misconception by real gay men since they mistake the genre as being queer and as a result, they condemn BL as commodifying their experiences or not properly representing them. However, as Nobi argues as well, BL does not consider its characters as gay, it does not consider itself as queer literature but rather as an outlet for female fantasy. Hence, while it is not political and does not concern itself with representing gay men, actual gay men do not identify with the content either. It may, however, have a potential to be politic but, I disagree with such potential in the context of Korea, China or Japan. In European or North American contexts where LGBTQ+ rights struggle has a tradition itself and recognized both on societal and state level it indeed is political. It also has a history with going hand in hand with feminist struggle from time to time as well.

²⁹⁴ Satō, “Shōjo manga to homophobia.” In Nagaike and Aoyama, “What Is Japanese ‘BL Studies?’” 124.

In Korea, for example, the feminist movement “*t’alBL* (abandon BL)” which argues that the feminist women should abandon BL, has gained attention in recent years.²⁹⁵ Based on various motivations it posits that BL is not feminist: “it idealizes gay men and gay sex which in reality are ugly and have unclean and unhygienic sex and it brainwashes women to idealize gay men,”²⁹⁶ “the *gong-su* (*seme-uke*) relationship reinforce the unequal power relations between men and women,” “it marginalizes or excludes women in its narrative and lacks a ‘women’s narrative’ since it focuses on the depiction of romance between male characters, and it also encourages female readers to deny/displace their own female bodies through identifying with male characters.”²⁹⁷ *T’alBL* presents potential for an interesting discussion, however here I would like to answer to the points that are relevant to our discussion. The first point both being a homophobic view and mistakenly considering BL as queer literature, it is not relevant to our discussion here, the second criticism is one that is discussed, supported, and countered many times in the academic work regarding BL. What I would like to add here is that while trends and tropes that are subjected to criticism continue, BL also evolves and creates different tropes and trends that establish power equality between characters and further break down gender norms by assigning traits in a way to disturb the inequality. The third point posits that ‘women’s narrative’ which is characterized by, according to the definition provided by Hyojin Kim (2022), “female protagonists, strong and active characters, depicting heterosexual romance and marriage and no sexual

²⁹⁵ Kim, “Rethinking the Meaning of Boys Love in an Era of Feminism,” 92-105

²⁹⁶ This is another instance where BL is mistaken for queer literature, this time by Korean feminists. It should be noted that BL does not identify or claim itself to be queer literature. On the contrary it acknowledges its characters as heterosexual men who happen to fall in love with another man hence, in its essence it does not tell stories about gay men but heterosexual men that represent women’s fantasies.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 97-103

objectification of women” lacks in BL and in the continuum of ‘women’s narrative’ it belongs to the first stage of ‘male only’ works in which only male characters are important and female characters only appear as dead, as saints (in the sense that they are good people), or as prostitutes.²⁹⁸ According to this argument, in its essence, BL does not present or include women in a ‘politically correct’ manner.²⁹⁹ I agree that BL may not be politically correct but it is because BL is not political in the first place and it goes for both ways. As it is not political for queer/LGBTQ+ people it is not political for women as well. It provides women with an escape from heteropatriarchal and gendered order as well as power to claim the right to produce and consume pornography, engage in with their fantasies, and express themselves as sexual and erotic agents without the judgement of society. It is a product of entertainment and also a cultural product which does not claim to advocate for women or their rights through its content. Of course, producing and consuming BL can be thought as acts of feminist resistance as I discussed earlier and in the case of an authoritarian state like China it does have the potential to be political with regards to its relationship with the government whether it is intended or not. When one gets arrested just for producing something in contrast with the state-ideology can one remain apolitical, or can BL remain apolitical? I think what is definitive here is, how important intentionality is in defining what is political and an act of resistance.

In conclusion, I posit that Queer Theory alone is sufficient in explaining or accounting neither for the demand nor the reason for BL’s emergence completely. Even though BL has queer practices and possess a potential to be political³⁰⁰ it inherently is not and does not aim to be political in the context of Japan, China, and

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 102.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 102.

³⁰⁰ Welker, “Introduction,” 4.

Korea unlike Welker (2022)'s claim. Both queer and feminist theories argue that what is 'personal is political,' however in BL's case I think the concept of intentionality is an important aspect in the sense that the creators of BL do not create content in order to be political or argue for any ideology the same way fans do not consume BL in a political context. They do not engage with queer or feminist issues politically through BL or at least they do not see BL as a medium for that end. On the other hand, once a cultural product is created and leave its habitat/fandom it can have effects beyond what was intended originally. In this sense, the reactions from the governments seem to be politicizing BL externally. In this context, the second question I posit tackles the impact of state power on BL.

The second question, therefore, aims to understand the seemingly different reactions from Korean and Chinese states towards BL genre. Initially, it seemed that while Korea adopted a less strict approach toward BL and queer content in general by allowing them to be published and adapted into online series or animations (Semantic Error, Mignon, Shutline etc.), China seemed to adopt a strict and authoritarian stance toward BL by censoring and banning content or outright punishing the creators. However, when delved into further, the picture seemed to change. As it was illustrated by the discussion above, Chinese and Korean governments as ruling powers in a society create the dominant ideological and cultural discourses through different methods or rather different levels of strictness. Their conservative patriarchal hegemonic discourses align with each other and their core agenda of being in power. This is illustrated by the official rhetorics of both states' evidenced by the statements of state officials and legislative conducts. Both countries have a rising discourse of anti-feminism and misogyny, a gendered division of roles in their societies and a general intolerance toward 'liberal' concepts such as

feminism, individualism, and queerness. Korea, having a non-pluralist electoral democracy, with its conservative undertones has yet to reach the necessary plurality of a full-fledged liberal democracy, even though under its law women are considered equal to men, LGBTQ+ people are not protected by Korean law despite certain attempts to pass a non-discrimination law to ensure legal equality for all minority groups including LGBTQ+ community. And although women are protected under law, in practice they do suffer from inequality in work place, in their families, and in society. They also face social and legal insecurities as well. The conservative former³⁰¹ President Yoon Suk Yeol's election, along with the rising online anti-feminist discourse showcase the prevalent conservative tendencies which has been growing strong again in Korean society. His misogynistic and discriminatory rhetoric regarding women, his pledge to abolish Ministry of Gender Equality which has been helping women and victims of sexual assault, and the fact that his voter demographic is being consisted of "young male voters of under 30"³⁰² aligns with the rising discourse of misogyny among young males in South Korea and how they have identified with Yoon's conservative ideology. China, a one-party socialist republic under 'democratic dictatorship' has laws that protect women while at the same time advocates for women to 'return home' through official rhetoric. The discourse of returning home is basically a call for Chinese women to re-assume their traditional roles in marriage and child-rearing. In an All-China Women's Federation meeting in 2023, Xi Jinping stated the important role women have in social and familial harmony and instructed the cadres to "guide women to play their roles in carrying forward the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation and in establishing good family

³⁰¹ On 4 April 2025 he was impeached and removed from office.

³⁰² Yoon, "South Korea."

traditions”³⁰³ while emphasizing the need for cultivating a new culture of marriage and child-bearing among women so the problem of aging population can be addressed by them.³⁰⁴ Hence, the government’s rhetoric as illustrated by this instance shows that even though there are legal actions to ensure women are ‘equal to men’ in the eyes of law, in reality they are not considered as equals. Xi and the dominant hegemonic discourse in China, position women in a gendered confinement of traditional duties just like Yoon and the Korean discourse. Neither country protects LGBTQ+ community under any law. Until 1997 homosexuality was punishable under law in China, and it was considered as a mental disorder until 2001. Whereas until 2003 homosexuality was classified as “harmful and obscene” by Korean law.

Both states having similar outlooks on women and queer community, they shape and create the dominant discourse in line with their respective ideologies. Of course, these ideologies are not completely separate from the society itself and are not solely unique or limited to the ruling class, since they have some basis in their societies especially among young males from the right political views, traditional and conservative elders or religiously conservative people. I argue that both Korea and China have a common goal that is to maintain and consolidate their status quo in the public eye however, they go about this in different ways. While Chinese government by the hand of law outright censors or bans content, intervenes with how people present themselves and their gender identities hence shaping the sexual discourse forcefully, Korean government has a more subtle approach in shaping the sexual discourse. It does not ban or censor any queer content, on the contrary it allows them in abundance on platforms where fans can pay to consume them. I also argue that both Korea and China in accordance with their ideologies would rather prevent

³⁰³ Wang, “Xi vs. She.”

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

queerness to be politicized. They, in different degrees, allow queer/BL content to exist when it can be monetized and remain solely in the realm of fantasy without getting involved in or affect real life. In this context, the abundance of Korean BL content further confines it into the domain of fantasy since it renders hard for people to relate or identify with the content. This lack of ‘realness’ also stems from BL being a genre for entertainment and not having any inherent aim or purpose for promoting queer/LGBTQ+ issues in the first place. On the other hand, China does not even allow any overt displays of romance or sexual relationship depicted in BL contents. Thus, creators either self-censor, publish their work abroad or try to circumvent the censorship by certain tactics which posit some risks if they are reported or detected.

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Foucault’s concepts of power, biopolitics, governance, discipline, surveillance, and Williams’ concept of culture provide sufficient framework for the common motivation between Korean and Chinese states in establishing and shaping a dominant discourse by which they determine the dominant culture. Chang Kyung-Sup’s compressed modernity accounts for the co-existence of the emergent youth culture that is extremely attuned to global trends, and also the ‘liberal’ concepts such as feminism, human rights and freedom, queer/LGBTQ+ politics along with traditional conservative set of beliefs and practices, also ‘modernization’ manifesting through materialistic aspects in these nations. Experiences of both nations with this rapid and compressed modernization process also aroused nationalistic tendencies that urged them to establish their core Korean and Chinese identities while denouncing concepts they deemed harmful such as feminism or queerness as being “foreign, Western, anti-nationalist, etc.”

While these concepts and theories establish the common ground between Korea and China in their endeavor of protecting their cultural and political

hegemonies the new neoliberal capitalistic order which puts consumerism above almost everything may account for the existence of BL content as long as it is monetized and profited from. In this aspect, Korea indeed seems to be considering the success of BL as some sort of soft power and a source of revenue both domestically and internationally. Thus, instead of abolishing these contents altogether it contains them into the domain of fantasy where they are not politicized or become too visible to the public. However, despite also being a capitalistic economy itself (although in a different manner than Korea), China seem to be prioritizing its political hegemony and its party-state ideology as it does not allow the existence of any content remaining outside the boundaries of state ideology that beautifies homosexuality and fluid gender identities. It bans and censors BL content, punishes BL creators, men who do not present themselves in a masculine way dictated by state discourse, and feminist women who protest and disturb the established status quo and patriarchal hegemony by bringing attention to their real-life experiences and struggles.

In conclusion, I argue that the difference between the severity of their reactions toward BL stems in essence from their motivation for articulating to global economy and how they aim to achieve that. In this context, the manner in which they were modernized has also shaped their attitudes. China through the majority of its history was an unconquered civilization and a mighty force in Asia. Its catalytic experience with Western power and several defeats it had suffered under Western empires were, without a doubt, shocking and traumatic. It had undergone rapid transformations and modernization under Mao's rule by first rejecting their old ways and traditions which had thousands of years history. In post-Mao era it has opened up to the global market and culture, but it still tries to adjust and reconcile these new and

rapid changes with an ancient and constant Chinese identity. The modernization endeavor was initiated and undertaken by the Chinese state without allowing any intervention in their internal affairs from any outsiders. Whereas even though Korea's experience of modernization may be traumatic to some degree due to their experience under Japanese colonization, it seems to have more positive undertones. The support of US in its modernization endeavor established the new Korean state and also its ideology as an anti-communist and conservative one. The Korean nation had undergone rapid economic growth, urbanization, democratization, and modernization. Korean people has been reconciling their top-to-bottom democratization and modernization, consumerist and capitalistic order brought by rapid economic growth with their native traditional culture and Korean identity. Even though the modernization endeavor was initiated by the state like the Chinese case, unlike China the Korean state was in collaboration with the US, a foreign power. Hence, American influence was extremely strong in Korea from the beginning of the establishment of its Republic.

As a result of their different modernization paths, the way they articulate to the global economy differs as well. Korea as a result of its close relations with the US has joined to the global economy rather early and has been able to be more integrated to it compared to China. It also has adopted soft power as its strategy for integrating into global economy and gaining influence internationally. China, on the other hand, has entered the global economy later compared to Korea and it does not position soft power as its main strategy for gaining influence and producing symbolic capital in the global arena. The different attitudes they assume in their international policies projects on to their degree of strictness towards BL as well. I argue that China is more dedicated to protect and maintain its political power as a party-state

compared to its desire to produce symbolic and cultural capital by soft power. It has not and does not allow any intervention in its internal affairs as illustrated by its modernization period. It promotes uniqueness and ancientness of Chinese tradition and even its policies toward promoting and achieving soft power has desire for Chinese cultural domination. In other words, even its soft power is not 'soft' but rather stagnant and strict in emphasizing Chinese domination. The state authority and power rests heavily on party-state's ideology and moral, sexual, and cultural discourse that it has built and shaped. Anything that threatens or remains outside of the official discourse is eliminated by the hand of government. Hence, despite having a capitalistic order, protecting and maintaining political power outweighs monetizing cultural products and trying to utilize them as capital for soft power in order to integrate to the global economy. For Korea, the reverse can be argued. Korea, even though a non-pluralist and conservative democracy, still does not possess the same degree of indisputable political power as China does. From its establishment as a modern state, it has been open to collaboration with other nations and has been more integrated to the global scene. A unique Korean identity is important for Korea to establish and promote, in doing so Korea truly embraces soft power in that through its promotion and support of cultural products it has created a positive opinion and image about Korea which turned into a major source of revenue. Korea is a highly consumerist and capitalistic society where cultural products are monetized through highly established platforms both domestically and internationally. Hence, while it is definitely important for the state to protect its ideology and discourse, and it has the urge to do so, as it illustrated by its authoritarian reflexes surfacing from time to time, it chooses to produce revenue in line with the capitalistic urges of the system, as well as its soft power strategies. Korean state opts for more subtle ways of control

in that it produces certain rhetorics and gives platform and visibility to those who support its discourse and ideology, curating the media in order to both continue producing revenue from cultural products such as BL content all the while confining it to the realm of fantasy and preventing it from politicizing. It does not utilize law and the legal system like China does in subduing what it ideologically finds threatening, rather its legal inactivity and silence towards queer minorities and recent discourse concerning women shapes the sexual, moral, and social discourse according to its agenda. In conclusion, I argue that there seems to be a difference in what degree Chinese and Korean states use or are allowed to use their power and the tools they utilize to maintain their ideological hegemony. This difference stems from the different strategies they possess in order to join to global economy and how they build consent domestically. Korea prioritize soft power and cultural product that brings revenue as it is illustrated by its *Hallyu* strategy while China does not pay the same precedence to soft power in order to join to the global economy but rather forming its sphere of influence through providing debts, investments in infrastructure, transportation, and communication projects abroad which is illustrated by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. Korean state utilizes *Hallyu* and its success as a tool for building consent and legitimizing itself while China achieves public consent through its moral leadership in which it provides people with protection against any dissidents, provide optimized living conditions, and ensures their wellbeing. Hence, while Korea has a more tolerant attitude towards BL content as a cultural product and a source of both economic and symbolic capital as well as a source of consent and legitimacy, China does not possess the same tolerance having different priorities in its endeavor to articulate to global economy and maintaining people's consent.

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