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ARTICULATING THE "L" WORD ONLINE: A STUDY OF CHINESE SLASH FANDOM OF *SUPER GIRL*

by

Jing Zhao

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ABSTRACT
ARTICULATING THE "L" WORD ONLINE: A STUDY OF CHINESE SLASH
FANDOM OF *SUPER GIRL*

by

Jing Zhao

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012
Under the Supervision of Elana Levine, Ph. D.

This thesis presents a case study of one of the most popular online Chinese fandoms,

Fei Se Chao Nv. This online Chinese fan forum is dedicated to slash writings and

queer readings of androgynous female celebrities of a sensational Chinese reality TV

show, *Super Girl*. The purpose of this study is to explicate the intricate negotiations

between queer and normative cultures within this online, non-mainstream, fannish

space. Through a discourse analysis of how the slash fans imagine lesbian

relationships, narrate lesbian stories, and queerly gossip about the *Super Girl*

androgynous celebrities in the forum, the study concludes that the fans' slash practices

are frequently complicated by, and struggle with, the normative positioning of lesbian

desires, identities, and relationships as deviant in heterocentric Chinese society.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Slash fandom, a subgenre of fan culture focusing on the elaboration of latent

romantic and/or sexual relationships between same-sex characters in popular cultural

texts, has evolved into a global phenomenon in recent years.[1] With the increasing

prevalence of Internet use worldwide, online slash fan culture has been enjoying a

growing popularity and diversity. Meanwhile, the formation of international,

transnational, and cross-cultural slash fandoms has been greatly accelerated in the age

of media convergence and cultural globalization. Although, in both fandom and

academia, slash is most often applied to Western fan creations, it is not a new practice

for Chinese fans.[2] Empowered by highly-developed digital tools and web-based

communication, Chinese slash fans are able to overcome geographical barriers,

reshape global information flows, repurpose popular culture, remake media content,

and reassemble and reconstruct materials that are meaningful to them.

Slash has gradually become a significant means for people with marginalized

sexual identities and non-mainstream cultural interests to communicate in China. A

variety of slash activities thriving online, such as slash fanfic writings and queer

readings, offer creative sites of explicit queer-related conversations and productions

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[1] Some Western scholars apply the term "slash" exclusively to erotic fan fiction telling stories about relationships between male media characters. In some cases, another term, "gen," is used to refer to non-erotic romance fiction around same-gender pairings. In the academic examination of fans' writing about romantic and sexual relationships between female characters, the term "femslash/femmeslash" is often used. "Girlslash" is also applied, though less often, in certain studies of queer girl culture. In this thesis, I use the term "slash" to refer to all kinds of fan activities surrounding same-sex fantasies including but not limited to fan discussions, gossip, queer readings, and fantasy constructions surrounding both celebrities and the fictional characters they portray. In some parts of this thesis, I also use "femslash" to differentiate female/female slash fandom from male/male slash fandom.

[2] Most Chinese fandoms, fan cultures, and related fan activities discussed in this thesis are limited to the fan sites built and dominated by fans located in Mainland China. However, due to the wide accessibility of Chinese fan sites, fans all over the world could consume and/or participate in these fan activities.

that are less likely in off-line public spaces. In this sense, the emergence of Chinese

slash fandom not only embodies the active role of Chinese fans in cultural

participation on a global scale, but also enables the articulation of alternative and

potentially subversive voices impermissible within dominant Chinese cultural

discourses.

What makes online Chinese slash fandom intriguing is the fans' constant

negotiation with normative understandings of same-sex desires that are prevalent in

off-line, mainstream Chinese society. It should be noted that the objects Chinese fans

fantasize about in this kind of fandom are by no means limited to self-identified

non-heterosexual celebrities or to queer-themed media. As of 2012, there has been an

astonishingly large quantity of slash sites built by Chinese fans for expressing queer

desires, constructing queer fantasies, and presenting queer readings of mainstream,

heterosexual popular culture.

In this thesis, I present a case study of one of the most popular online Chinese

fandoms for slash writings and queer readings of androgynous female celebrities of a

sensational Chinese reality TV show, *Super Girl* (HNTV, 2004-2011. *SG* hereafter).

The highlight of this show is the large number of contestants who look either "boyish"

or "androgynous" (Yardley 2005). Like many gay contestants on *American Idol*, who

"have largely kept their [queer] identity under wraps" (Battles 2008), these female

contestants on *SG* have never been willing to talk about their sexual orientations in

public. The latent intimate relationships between these contestants, though, are the

focal point of its online slash fandoms. My research concentrates on *Fei Se Chao Nv*

(*FSCN* hereafter), one of the most popular slash fan sites for the show.[3] This forum was built in 2006 and is fraught with slash gossip, slash vidding, and slash writings. By the end of May 2012, the forum had more than 460,000 entries and over 3,200 threads. Hundreds of original slash fictions have been circulated on this site, a few of which are more than 300,000 words in length.[4] In my project, I explore the degree to which *FSCN* fans' online slash activities challenge the traditional, stereotypical, and heterocentric ideologies of gender roles and sexual orientation rooted in heterosexually-structured Chinese society.

The intricate negotiations between online slash activity and off-line Chinese heterocentric hegemony raise many research questions. Can slash fandom be considered anti-heteronormative and counter-hegemonic in the Chinese context? Or does Chinese slash fandom reproduce the cultural and social hierarchies differentiating the normative from the deviant? Does slash necessarily transgress the mainstream portrayals of heterosexuality and the stereotyping of non-heterosexuality? Will the queer discourses in Chinese slash fandom ultimately promote off-line resistance to the discrimination, isolation, and marginalization of same-sex desires in China?

With these questions in mind, I focus my research on uncovering the ways

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[3] The fan site referred to is Pink Super Girl Bar (*Fei Se Chao Nv*), which is available at
http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E7%B3%C9%AB%B3%AC%C5%AE
[4] According to Yang & Bao's (2012) research, as of August 2008, there have been 480 complete fan fictions circulated in this forum. However, it is hard to specify the exact number of both complete and incomplete fan fictions posted on this site. Some slash fictions have been deleted by the authors. And some of the fictions were original posted on other slash sites and moved to *FSCN* later. *Zhong Du* (*Poisoning*), for instance, is a slash fiction devoted to the pairings of 2006 *SG* contestants that used to be posted on another slash site *BT Ji Zhong Ying* (*BT Concentration Camp*). A few incomplete fictions in *FSCN* are also among the most influential ones. For example, one fan fiction published in this forum, *Fei Se Shi* (*Pink Affairs*), is more than 300,000 words in length. It is the most popular fiction in the forum. Yet, it is an unfinished story.

FSCN's fans imagine lesbian relationships, narrate lesbian stories, and queerly gossip about female celebrities. My analysis of these online slash activities distinguishes the stances and attitudes of the fans when they imagine fictional lesbian romances from their attitudes toward nonfictional lesbian rumors surrounding the celebrities. In so doing, I argue that, while cultural involvement in online slash fandom temporarily liberates Chinese fans from the gender- and sexuality-related taboos deeply seated in Chinese mainstream culture, their slash activities are not wholly resistant sites. Rather, their online fan practices are frequently complicated by, and struggle with, the normative positioning of lesbian desires, identities, and relationships as deviant in heterocentric Chinese society. The fans' diverse, paradoxical understandings of and perspectives over constructed lesbianism in slash fictions and real-life lesbian identities of both the celebrities and the fans themselves are the epitome of the complex processes in which the fans discursively challenge and negotiate with normative and hegemonic definitions of same-sex desires in traditional Chinese culture.

_SG_ as a Lesbian Spectacle in China

A prominent reality show produced by the Hunan Provincial TV station (HNTV hereafter), *SG* is an *American Idol*-style, large-scale, Chinese TV singing contest that only allows female participants. It has become a "media spectacle" (Meng 2009) and has drawn great media and public attention since its premiere in 2004.[5] In each season,

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[5] Some research states that *SG* started to become the focus of the public nationwide as of 2005 (e.g., Cui & Lee 2010). Yet, the first season of *SG* in 2004 achieved regional success in some areas in mainland China, such as Hunan province. This is the main reason why *SG* attracted 120,000 participants during their preliminary selection rounds in 2005.

the show starts with a weekly broadcast of the "preliminary selection round" (*Hai Xuan* in Chinese) which is usually held in five major cities in mainland China. The preliminary audition has no restrictions on the participants' age, outward appearance, career, singing style, or any other backgrounds. A wide range of Chinese contestants from all over the world have been motivated to participate (Yardley 2005; Lo 2006). In its second season, in 2005, *SG* attracted about 120,000 participants to audition (Meng 2009, 260) and 400,000,000 viewers in the final round (Yue & Yu 2008, 118).

Although *SG*'s selection criteria and processes have been changed frequently and become more and more complicated, the general rule is that whether the contestants can proceed to the next round and eventually win the contest is determined by the responses from three groups of people: several professional judges, a small team of randomly-selected, public judges (*Da Zhong Ping Shen* in Chinese), and the nationwide audience. While the professional and public judges can vote for the contestants in the live studio after the contestants' performances, the audience is allowed to vote for its favorite contestants through SMS messages. After several rounds' selection, the top ten contestants in the regional competitions go to the city Changsha for the national competition. The ranking of the final three contestants in the national competition is solely decided by the audience's SMS votes (Meng 2009, 260).

SG is certainly not the first reality TV show broadcast in mainland China. However, it is undeniably the most influential and profitable one (Yue & Yu 2008, 118). The cell phone voting of the *SG* audience has been seen as creating a Chinese

form of "democratic entertainment" (Jian & Liu 2009; Xiao 2006) and "the largest

voting exercise ever conducted in China" (Yardley 2005). It is also a main venue for

the show's producers to reap profits. In 2005, every single SMS vote cost 0.1 Chinese

Yuan (about $0.016 in U.S. dollars). In 2006, the show's manufacturer raised the price

for one vote to 1 Chinese *Yuan* (about $0.16 in U.S. dollars). Every phone number is

allowed to send 15 votes at the most for the same individual contestant in one voting

round. In order to better support their own idols, some avid fans purchase multiple

cell phone SIM cards and use different phone numbers to vote for the same contestant.

It was rumored that, in the final voting round in the 2006 national competition, the

audience's SMS messages brought about more than 20,000,000 Chinese *Yuan* of profit

(about $3,120,000 in U.S. dollars) to HNTV (Sina 2007). The winner of the 2005 *SG*

received 3,500,000 votes during the broadcast of the last episode. In 2006, the winner

obtained more than 5,190,000 votes in total in the last voting round (Sina 2007).

As a provincial reality TV show, *SG*'s spectacular reception and economic

success raises the question of what has made so many fans spare no effort in

supporting the contestants. The "ordinariness" of the contestants (Turner 2004; Meng

Paraphrasing Ouellette & Murray 2009, 258), the authenticity of reality TV (Fiske

2003, 278; Ouellette & Murray 2004, 2), and the unpredictability of a reality TV

show's results (Turner 2004) hardly account for *SG*'s unprecedented popularity. It has

been noted that, thanks to reality TV, "[w]hat constitutes the ordinary in the media …

has been opened up dramatically to offer us multiple versions of class, gender,

sexuality and ethnicity" (Turner 2004, 83). In this vein, the success of *SG* can be at

least partially attributed to its potential to offer the audience a "'sudden media exposure of lesbian and gay people' in prime-time television in China" (French Quoting Kam 2010), though in a subtle way.

Notably, two of the ten 2005 *SG* contestants who made the final round "obviously challenged traditional gender norms" (Lo 2006, 2). In its third season, in 2006, at least four of the ten finalists exhibited an obvious tomboyish style. In the 2011 national competition, there was even a duo constituted by one feminine girl and one tomboyish girl. They dressed and played as a heterosexual couple when performing songs. Although they insisted that they were cousins, not lesbian lovers, there have been consistent lesbian rumors about their relationship. Since 2005, numerous comments made by the audience and reporters have also stressed the "underlying" lesbian representations on *SG*. The winner in 2005, Yuchun Li, who has an obvious "baby dyke" (hannahmiller 2009) look, was said to be emblematic of "the growing openness about homosexuality in China" (Lo 2006, 2). Some people believe that most of Li's fans are young girls who regard her as "their 'boyfriend' because of her appearance" (Yardley 2005). The large number of androgynous participants renders *SG* an implicit lesbian spectacle. This explosion and popularity of androgynous females on the show is not accidental.

Before this surge in popularity of androgynous females in the 2005 *SG*, most female images in Chinese mainstream media were selected and constructed through the voyeuristic angle of heterosexual males (Yue & Yu 2008). *SG*, as a new media platform open to a grassroots public, provides underrepresented Chinese females with

a chance to voice themselves in varying ways. As noted by Nick Couldry, it is "the fantasy of being included in some way in major cultural forums" that propels the audience to participate in the auditions and/or voting of reality TV shows (2000, 55). The unrestricted preliminary audition and the audience's voting rights on *SG* further encourage the participation of those with non-hegemonic gender personas. During its preliminary audition, there are always a great many androgynous contestants. The imperfect voice and nontraditional stage performances of a few of *SG*'s androgynous contestants, such as Yuchun Li, have provoked a lot of professional criticism. However, their fans' voting and emotional support often overwhelmed that of other, more conventionally feminine contestants and helped many of these androgynous contestants successfully move toward the final national selection. Through auditioning for the show and/or supporting the androgynous contestants, many females have expressed their great interest in gender and sexual representations that defy traditional, (hetero)normative femininity.

In this project, I look at the continuing struggles and negotiations between mass media images, mainstream ideologies, and femslash culture within a Chinese online, fannish, cultural and social environment. I bridge the cultural, social, and historical shapings of today's Chinese audiences of diverse gender and sexual identities with their online productions and virtual performances. In so doing, my research reveals the mesmerizing yet perplexing cultural phenomena showcased by one of many online, Chinese, queer spaces devoted to the lesbian connotations of mass media.

Literature Review

My thesis strives to provide a sophisticated understanding of queer-centered subcultures in online fandom. To achieve this goal, I review the ever-evolving scholarly ideas on gender- and sexuality-related issues within slash fandom on a global scale and in Chinese society. By means of reviewing academic literature on these subjects, I attempt to uncover that, although Chinese slash fans have long been categorized as members of non-mainstream groups obsessed with queer-themed activities, they constantly struggle with mainstream, normative culture's constructions of same-sex desires during their online slash activities.

Fandom, Slash, and Cyberspace

Since the late 1980s, scholars have begun to uncover the various ways fans interpret mass media and popular culture (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Fiske 1989; Grossberg 1984; Jenkins 1992; Modleski 1982; Radway 1991; Russ 1985). Most of this early fan scholarship attempts to legitimize the academic value of fan cultures by unveiling the active cultural involvement of socially, culturally, and politically underprivileged publics in media fandom. My thesis further emphasizes the potential of fandom to voice the desires and interests of gender, sexual, and cultural minorities. But, the main focus of my project is to indicate the complexities of fans' repurposing of gender- and sexuality-related information in mainstream entertainment media and popular culture without essentializing the empowering and liberating functions of these intricate meaning-making processes in fandom.

Some scholars have already warned that fandom cannot be simplified as a site of resistance to oppressive mainstream ideologies. John Fiske (1992) has noted the

possibility of fans to reconstruct varying degrees and forms of cultural discrimination and social hierarchy within fandom. Henry Jenkins (1992) also notices that fan culture is not a complete departure from dominant, hegemonic culture but an ideological negotiation between fans' own social experiences and the meanings of mainstream media. Likewise, Harry M. Benshoff believes that, rather than sabotaging mainstream ideologies, fan activity, "dramatizes the active counter-hegemonic negotiation of very serious political issues" (1998, 201). Inspired by these studies, my examination of fandom explores the complex ways that Chinese fans negotiate with marginalized queer imaginations and mainstream Chinese conventions in a virtual, non-mainstream social and cultural environment. I do not focus my discussion of Chinese fan culture on its potential for making major changes to current queer politics and cultural conventions in off-line, heterocentric Chinese society. Instead, I argue that Chinese fans' acculturation within heterosexual hegemony rooted in local Chinese conventions complicates the online cultural discourses in which Chinese fans construct their queer fantasies.

Undeniably, it is hard to talk about today's online slash fandoms without mentioning some tremendously influential scholarship on fan activity in the pre-Internet era, such as Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992). Both studies employ an ethnographic approach to assess fans' active responses to mainstream media texts. Yet, given the limited scope of the studies, neither of them succeeds in offering an

examination of dissimilar meanings created amongst diverse groups of fans. While successfully legitimizing fans' active role in cultural consumption, Jenkins' (1992) aca-fan perspective conceives of fan productions as always marginal to canonical media texts and a capitalist media industry. Bacon-Smith (1992) accounts for women's rewriting of popular culture as gender empowerment without considering the differences amongst female fans as variables in her research. Unlike these early studies, my research on online Chinese fandom addresses the significance of the unique social and cultural identities of Chinese fans in online interpretative activity. I argue that the particular social, historical, and cultural shapings of online Chinese fans make their queer interpretations of popular culture distinct processes of cultural negotiation. Therefore, the online rereading activity of today's fans cannot be understood within either dominant/subordinate or empowering/repressive paradigms.

The explosion of online information has brought underground fan cultures to the surface and revolutionized the world of global fans. Francesca Coppa (2006, 54) points out that Internet use among fans has helped popularize a subgenre of fan culture——slash. Still, many Western scholars studied slash activity long before the coming of web-based fandom. According to Constance Penley, the rise of Western slash fandom happened "spontaneously in various places beginning in the early to mid-seventies" (1997, 101). Along with the popularization of slash fanzines, slash fandom attracted more academic attention beginning in the early 1980s.

Some early Western fan studies claimed that slash fandom was primarily comprised of heterosexual women who were exclusively interested in fictional

male/male intimate relationships (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Jenkins 1994; Penley 1992), and gave little attention to the racial, ethnic, and national differences within fandom (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Fiske 1992). Of course, this viewpoint is no longer upheld by most fan scholars. In recent years, a few Western scholars interested in femslash fandom have emphasized the popularity, significance, and potential of female/female bondings and pairings in the productions of female fans of a diversity of sexual orientations (e.g., Hamming 2001; Lothian & Busse & Reid 2007; Ng 2008; Russo 2002; Russo 2009). Yet, the failure of this body of literature to consider non-Western possibilities in femslash fandom has not been sufficiently questioned.

My project adds to this dialogue around femslash fandom by introducing the existence of online international femslash fandoms. I do not mean to claim that all the fans engaged in the *FSCN* forum or other Chinese femslash fandoms are self-identified lesbian or bisexual females. Yet, I employ the concept of queerness in this research to denote all kinds of non-heterosexual cultural interests, identifications, positions, and sexual desires. In turn, I argue that all the fans actively involved in slash fandom are looking at mainstream entertainment media and popular culture from a non-heterosexual perspective. Consequently, slash fans can be defined as queers whose participation and experience in popular culture transcend rigid borders of gender and sexual identity.

Gender and Sexuality in Slash Fandom

Even in an age when online slash is unprecedentedly popular among fans

worldwide, academic work on femslash culture remains rare in comparison to the studies of male/male slash. In male/male slash studies, gender and sexual identity are always the center of attention. Most of the early Western scholarship concerning slash culture attempted to explain the essential reasons for heterosexual women to be enthusiastically engaged in slash fanfic writing and queer readings. For example, Joanna Russ sees slash fan fiction about homoerotic relationships between men written by women as "feminist pornography" (1985). Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diane Veith (1986) further argue that male/male slash stories fundamentally exemplify heterosexual women's desires for gender equality within heterosexual relationships. Constance Penley (1991), while not denying the subversive potential of slash writing to create and circulate unconventional gender roles, emphasizes the function of slash writing in "creating pleasures found lacking in original products" (139). According to Penley's (1992) psychoanalytical approach, slash writing and reading offer heterosexual women entry points for self-identification with the male characters in the stories. Furthermore, she contends that erotic slash writing could be understood as a "project of retooling masculinity itself" (Penley 1997, 101). In this sense, the representation of same-gender sexual intimacy in slash fiction does not necessarily signify an aspiration for homosexuality (Penley 1992, 487). These understandings of gender and sexuality in previous slash scholarship have been challenged by newer theories of queerness in slash fandom.

More recent studies illustrate that slash fandom should not be studied solely as a gendered space (e.g., Reid 2009; Sandvoss 2005) or as a restricted, homoerotic

environment while denying the diversity and fluidity of the sexual identities of its

participants (e.g., Busse & Lothian 2009; Jones 2002; Kohnen 2008). Robin Anne

Reid (2009) proposes that the focus of slash studies should move from debates over

the heterosexuality/homosexuality and masculinity/femininity binarisms to an

emphasis on the ongoing negotiation of queerness and normativity exemplified in fan

productions. According to Reid's understanding, much previous slash scholarship tries

to universalize slash activity as akin to traditional feminine genres and thereby to

align slash narratives with romance fictions that embody "the conventions of romance

plots, domestic settings, and the ideal of egalitarian relationships" (2009, 467). Reid

(2009) criticizes this way to look at slash for ignoring the potential of slash fandom,

especially online slash fandom, to destabilize fixed categories of gender and sexuality.

Some studies of queer media, spectators, and culture have also broadened the

approach of slash scholarship to queer theories (e.g. Doty 1993; Driver 2006; Kohnen

2008). It has been argued that fans' reinterpretation and repurposing of

non-heterosexual connotations of popular culture articulate not only the expressions

of self-identified sexual minorities but also the responses from "all other potential

(and potentially unclassifiable) nonstraight positions" (Doty 1993, xvi). This kind of

queer reading activity, in Doty's term, should be identified as "a mass culture

reception practice" (1993, 2). Echoing Doty's suggestions, Melanie E.S. Kohnen

(2008) suggests a spectatorial position, "seeing queerly," to distinguish active

experiences of queer viewing from fixed categories of queer identity. She proposes

that TV fans should be recognized as spectators and studied through "an approach that

indicate[s] a move beyond the hetero-homosexual binary" (Kohnen 2008, 210).

Following this definition of queerness in media audience studies, I continue this debate by arguing that slash activity and normative understandings of gender and sexuality are not mutually exclusive in certain online fan communities. Through identifying normative elements of *FSCN* slash culture, I further contend that slash writings and queer readings in online Chinese slash fandom do not guarantee an anti-normative and counter-hegemonic virtual queer utopia.

Normativity, Hegemony, and Queerness in Slash Fandom

Many academic studies on Western fan cultures frame slash fans as resistant to heteronormativity (e.g., Benshoff 1998, 201; Hayward 2000, 309; Rambukkana 2007). Certain slash cultures are believed to offer an anti-heteronormative queer diaspora (e.g., Bury 2005; Busse & Lothian 2009; Hanmer 2010; Lipton 2008; Reid 2009). Nevertheless, the potential of slash activity to empower gender and sexual minorities needs to be further questioned, as slash itself does not essentially trouble mainstream, heterocentric norms.

Some research has revealed that slash fans often incorporate the cultural assumptions and conventions of gender, sexuality, and human relations imposed within a specific cultural context into their own fannish activities (e.g., Berger 2010; Jenkins 1992; Kreisinger 2012; Ng 2008; Woledge 2005). Other studies demonstrate that slash fans sometimes privilege certain normative sexualities and identities over others (Lothian 2008; Ng 2008; Woledge 2006), restrict their own queer performances and preferences to virtual realities (Busse 2006), and appropriate "abnormal" contexts

to play out their queer fantasies and identities (Benshoff 1998; Doty 1993; Jones 2002;

Lothian & Busse & Reid 2007).

Additionally, plenty of scholarship on queer studies demonstrates that queers

are extremely subject to mainstream, conventional ideas about queer identities and

inclined to gain legitimacy through performing in conformity with heterosexist frames

of homosexuality (e.g., Dyer 2006; Gross 2001; Gross 2003; Jeppesen 2010). In view

of this normative tendency in queer culture, my project examines whether *FSCN* slash

fans inevitably assimilate and reproduce heteronormative and oppressive views about

non-heterosexual identities and relationships in their online activities.

In particular, based upon her own slash writing experiences, Susanne Jung

(2004) contends that slash fan fiction is a grassroots means of troubling the binarisms

of gender, sexuality, and heterosexual hegemony rooted in dominant culture. Jung's

slash fiction posits the main characters' homo-relationships in fantastic worlds

without gender-related dichotomies. As she (2004) asserts, it is a critical way of

writing to play with conventional tropes of gender and sexuality. In my project, I pay

particular attention to this "alternate reality (AR)" mode of slash fiction and gossip.

This type of slash narrative is a repositioning of the characters into cultural and social

contexts that are "already queered" (Benshoff 1998, 215; Doty 1993, 15; Jones 2002;

Ng 2008, 104; Woledge 2005).[6] In these culturally distant settings, homophobia or

sexual orientations "may be ... meaningless concep[ts]" (Green & Jenkins & Jenkins

1998, 22). Bearing on these points, my analysis of *FSCN* slash narratives seeks to

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[6] Certain genres, such as gothic, horror, and cult, are frequently appropriated in AR narratives.

reveal that some Chinese slash fans use Western worlds or other historical/futuristic

contexts as queer fantasy contexts in slash narratives to normalize fictional

lesbianism.

Asian BL/GL *Manga* Cultures

Studies on Asian slash culture have been divided into smaller and interrelated

subfields. One of the most popular Asian slash genres that has been given the most

academic attention is boys' love (BL) *manga*.[7] *Manga*, a popular art form that

originally started in Japan, is "akin to an American comic book or comic strip"

(Perper & Cornog 2002, 4). BL *manga* (BL hereafter) fandom is devoted to the

writing and consumption of fictional homoerotic stories about male characters. Some

unique characteristics of BL stories have been identified to distinguish BL from

Western slash or gay literature. For example, due to the influence of transgenderism in

Japan (Wood 2006; McLelland 2000b), the images of males in BL are usually very

feminized (McLelland 2000b, 13-14).

Some research sees BL as media "created by and for women" (Wood 2006,

394), an embodiment of "voyeurism" (Ogi 2001), and a site for females to play an

active role in the imagination of sexual intimacy (Fujimoto 1991). My project does

not intend to interrogate these views of BL in current scholarship. Instead, admitting

that the purpose and object of BL fandom are quite different from those of the fandom

that are analyzed in my project, I build my research on some relevant points drawn

from BL studies.

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[7] Terms, such as "BL," "boys' love," and "boy-love" have been applied to this kind of *manga* fandom in China.

A few scholars have recognized that there are some similarities between BL and Western slash cultures (e.g., Jenkins 1992; McLelland 2000a; Wood 2006). Andrea Wood (2006) points out that the global consumption of BL and Western male/male slash productions reflect women's frustration with mainstream, heterocentric culture worldwide. Also, many BL fictions narrate stories within culturally distant contexts. This anti-realism of BL narratives has been marked by a body of literature (e.g., Allison 1996; Aoyama 1988; Buckley 1991; Kinsella 1998; Li 2009; Wei 2008). As Wei Wei (2008) describes, "The [BL] stories are all set in an 'other' place, like Europe; the boys [in BL] are also depicted as the 'other', at least non-Japanese" (2008, 2). This narrative pattern resembles the escapist AR/AU slash mode in Western slash writing. Some scholars believe that it shows a disinterest of BL female fans in contemporary, real-world, queer-related issues (e.g., McLelland 2000b). However, by showing a similar yet more contradictory tactic in *FSCN* femslash writing to distance homoerotic narratives from the social realities of mainstream Chinese society, my project argues that this mode of slash narratives actually relies upon the fan writers' own frustrations with the mainstream denying, othering, and excluding of lesbianism in the nonfictional world.

Research has been dedicated to the discussion of normative notions of gender and sexuality within BL fandom. Mark McLelland (2000a) points out that *yaoi*, a subgenre of BL presenting stories with "the slenderest of pretexts for getting the male stars of popular television dramas into bed together" (2000a, 277), is characterized by elements of S/M and sometime reproduces patriarchal tropes of power differences in

its construction of sexual intimacy between two male characters. Nonetheless, it has

been argued that the gendered roles and relationships depicted in BL are fluid and

performative (Li 2009, 53; Wood 2006). Some research also claims that BL provides a

possible site of resistance to heteronormative discourses and a playground to trouble

fixed categories of gender and sexuality (McLelland 2000b; Welker 2006, 843; Wood

2006). Bearing on these arguments, I investigate the cultural implications of the

sexual relationships portrayed in *FSCN* femslash narratives with regard to

non-heterosexual females' identities and desires. Dissimilar to these findings in BL

scholarship, I argue that the lesbian sexual intimacy in slash literature can be read as a

result of the reconciliation of fannish, queer imaginations of mainstream images and

normative, patriarchal cultures' constructions of gender and sexuality.

Along with the rapid development of the online transnational fandom of BL,

more attention has been given to cross-cultural interpretations of this fan subculture.

While there remains little academic literature dedicated to both regional and global

girls' love (GL) *manga* fandom, some scholars believe that fans' lesbian desires can

be encouraged and liberated during writing and consuming BL.[8] In particular, Wood

terms American cross-cultural fandom of Japanese BL "a global counterpublic that is

both subversive and fundamentally queer in nature" (2006, 396). She argues that the

queerness of BL does not just lie in its depictions of the romantic and sexual

relationships between men but also is demonstrated by the fact that BL queers the

ways its female fans consume and experience sexual fantasies (2006, 397). More

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[8] Terms, such as "GL," "girls' love," and "girl-love" have been applied to this kind of *manga* fandom in China. Little scholarship has been devoted to Chinese local and cross-cultural GL fandom. According to Yang and Bao's research, this is because GL is often seen as "a female version" and a subcategory of BL (2012, 3).

importantly, Wood asserts that the graphic portrayal of androgynous, beautiful boys in

BL not only transgresses established gender and sexual categories but also reflects

"lesbian desir[es] being encoded within th[e] characters" (2006, 399). Similarly,

James Welker (2006) describes BL as offering a possible space for fans to free their

lesbian desires. Further, examining BL from a cross-cultural perspective, he finds that

the Western elements in BL "help to liberate writers and readers to work within and

against the [Japanese] local heteronormative paradigm in the exploration of [gender

and sexual] alternatives" (Welker 2006, 841). My project follows Welker's argument

to probe how the West is "borrowed" by *FSCN* fans to voice their queer desires.

Different from Welker's conclusion, I argue that Chinese local heterocentric

hegemony inevitably complicates *FSCN* fans' imagining of the West as a queer

utopia.

A body of academic literature has expressed interests in online Chinese fandom

of BL (e.g., Li 2009; Wei 2008). In her research on Chinese female fans of BL,

Yannan Li points out that some female fans are interested in reversing the portrayed

binary dominant/passive sex roles in BL stories.[9] However, Li's survey of Chinese

female BL fans also shows that Chinese women's appreciation of BL has no "direct

relation … [to] their attitudes towards LGBT group [in reality]" (Li 2009, 61-62).

Besides, Chinese female fans are inclined to clearly differentiate their real life from

their fantasies in BL fandom (Li 2009, 62). These findings appear similar to the

results of other research on Chinese BL fandom that "some female BL readers only

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[9] In some research, this binarism of sex roles in erotic relationships depicted in BL stories is also said to be top/bottom or initiator/receiver (*gong/shou* in Chinese).

accept homosexuality in the fictional world rather than in their everyday lives" (Yang

& Bao Paraphrasing Li 2012, 3). Yet, Li does not go further to contend that they are

demonstrative of Chinese BL fans' internalization of the dominant pathologizing of

same-sex desires (2009). Unlike Li's study, Wei's research on Chinese female BL fans

reveals fans' self-awareness of the "problematic" nature of their obsessions with BL

(2008, 20-21). Also, Wei confirms the existence of "hegemonic discourses" in

Chinese BL fandom by uncovering the fact that some Chinese fans "mock and

rearticulate the hegemonic gender norms in their fan writings" (Wei 2008, 22).

To test these findings in BL fan studies on Chinese femslash fandom, my

project looks at *FSCN* activity, such as queer gossip and discussions, for normative

and hegemonic elements of sexualities and identities. I explore whether *FSCN* fans

replicate the struggles to detach their online queer fantasies from the nonfictional, real

world, and the extent to which they try to separate their slash identities and activity

from both online and off-line mainstream social spaces.

SG as Reality TV and Its Fan Cultures

The online femslash fandom of *SG* has not been adequately discussed in

academia. Yet, *SG* has been frequently studied as the most successful reality talent

show in China. Witnessing the rise of *SG* grassroots fan communities since 2005, a

few scholars have concentrated their work on the power relationships between the

show and its fans. Most of the scholarship gives disproportionate attention to the

democratic discourses of *SG* and its fandoms, emphasizing the false empowerment of

fans, and downplaying the queer aspects of the show and its fandom (e.g., Cui & Lee

2010; Keane 2007; Meng 2009). Almost all of these discussions are built on Western research on reality TV.

Along with the global popularity of idol-manufacturing reality TV, such as *Pop Idol* in Britain, *American Idol* in the U.S., and a myriad of similar shows in other European and Asian countries, Western academic debates over the reasons for this formula's worldwide success are common. Some studies find that the "discourse of the real" (Ouellette & Murray 2004, 2; Fiske 2003, 278), the "ordinariness" and "authenticity" (Holmes 2004, 157), and the illusionary, empowering fantasy (Couldry 2000) of this kind of show are what attract the eyeballs of the general public. Especially for the audiences of singing contest reality shows, "[a]lthough the music performer may well be associated with a particular genre, style, and screen persona (In terms of the music video, for example), there is arguably a greater degree of blurring between on-stage and off-stage persona given that they are not literally playing a fictional role" (Holmes 2004, 152-153). In this light, it is the "real" essence of reality TV that in part makes reality singing contest shows unprecedentedly successful all over the world.

Others believe that the "reality" in reality TV "is constructed solely in order to produce a representation" of certain identities of grassroots publics that have not been emphasized enough in mass media (Turner 2004, 62). In this vein, it is the grassroots, cultural and media representations in reality TV that are the most appealing part. These representations are made through the processes of selecting and producing stars from the general public. This characteristic of reality TV is said to be extremely

significant for deprived groups, such as people of lower social status (e.g., Couldry 2000; Turner 2004). Also, as Richard Dyer has articulated, stars function as cultural signs for the audience and can be interpreted in terms of gender and sexuality (1986, 1998). In this sense, the celebrities manufactured by reality shows that greatly contribute to the representations of gender and sexual minorities on TV might obtain overwhelming support and welcome from an audience whose interests and identities are underrepresented and repressed in both media and the physical world.

Based on this viewpoint, my project further addresses the unique and complex way in which Chinese fans support, protect, and queerly read and fantasize about the androgynous *SG* celebrities. By analyzing the queer potential of the show and the slash productions and fan discourse on *FSCN*, I show that the popularity of some androgynous female celebrities among *FSCN* fans results from both *SG* producers' implicit queer exploitation of the androgyny of the participants and the fans' queer articulation of these lesbian connotations of the show.

Furthermore, in contrast to the research emphasizing the "real" aspect of reality TV, my study highlights that, for some *FSCN* fans, *SG* celebrities are still "fictional truths" (Nadalianis 2002, xv). They remain fictional media characters who can only play constructed, non-heterosexual roles in the fans' online queer gossip and imaginations. My project shows that, different from celebrity gossip, rumor, or tabloids that aim to "shar[e] social judgments" (Turner 2004, 107), "integrat[e] celebrities … into one's everyday life" (Turner 2004, 107), or "purpor[t] to tell the truth" (Busse 2006, 214), queer gossip on *FSCN* remains a form of imaginative, slash

activity. It is strictly separated from the celebrities' real life by the fans and only

limited to the fans' virtual spaces. Based upon my analysis of *FSCN* fan discourse, I

argue that this distinctive characteristic of *FSCN* slash activity reflects the intertwined

influences of off-line normative culture, repression of queer sexuality in mainstream

fan sites, and the cultural and sexual discrimination and othering within the virtual

queer space of *FSCN*.

It is worthwhile to mention that, in recent years, there have been several studies

focusing on *SG* fans' appreciation of the androgyny of some *SG* celebrities. In one

study concentrating on the non-mainstream gender performance of the 2005 winner of

SG, Yuchun Li, her androgynous persona is marked as "female masculinity" by

Audrey Yue and Haiqing Yu (2008). Yue and Yu (2008) see the popularity of Li's

tomboyish look as a new wave of feminism in China. While they believe that Li's

androgyny challenges traditional Chinese gender ideals, her fans' conflict over

queer-related topics is left unexplored. Although, as Yue & Yu (2008) have shown,

Li's female fans bravely express their love and support for her, these same-sex desires

are more frequently expressed through discourses of women's friendship and social

bonds.

The most recent scholarly analysis of *SG* fandom provided by Ling Yang and

Hongwei Bao (2012) suggests examining *SG* non-mainstream fan sites through a

queer lens.[10] This groundbreaking research on Chinese femslash is particularly

relevant here, as I present a study of the same *SG* slash forum in this thesis. Through

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[10] In their study, Yang and Bao equate online *SG* femslash culture with GL culture, which is closely related to Japanese media. However, given that a large portion of GL culture exclusively centers on the lesbian relationships between under-age, feminine girls, I see a difference between GL culture and *SG* slash culture in China.

an ethnographic study of *FSCN*, Yang and Bao (2012) contend that *SG* slash fandom

allows for a creative virtual space that is constructive to queer women's bonding and

disruptive to Chinese heterosexual hegemony. I do agree that slash activity in this

forum affords a site of queer desiring voices that is less likely in any off-line public

spaces in China. Nonetheless, my analysis of *FSCN* queer gossip and cultural

discourse seeks to problematize the optimistic view of *FSCN* as a queer-supportive

place for emancipating and empowering Chinese women of all kinds of gender, sexual,

and cultural identities. I contend that the intrusion of both online and off-line

normative Chinese ideologies into online slash activity should not be ignored. Thus, a

review of the academic literature on queer-related cultures, information flows, and

politics in China is particularly pertinent.

Queerness from a Chinese Perspective

Despite the fact that Chinese society has always been sexually conservative and

heterocentric, there was a neutral and tolerant attitude toward male homosexuality in

ancient Chinese culture as long as same-sex relationships were not challenging the

established status quo (Chou 2001; Hinsch 1990; Wu 2003; Zhang 2009). However,

some early studies of modern Chinese queer culture showed that most Chinese people

believed that there were no homosexual people in ancient Chinese society at all (e.g.,

Hinsch 1990; Wan 2001). In his research published more than two decades ago, Bret

Hinsch stated that the native homosexual tradition in ancient China, which lasted for

several hundred years at least, was unknown among not only "critics of

homosexuality" but also non-heterosexual people themselves in contemporary China

(1990, 171). This false perception was widely accepted among modern Chinese people because the definition of and the knowledge regarding non-heterosexuality in contemporary Chinese society has been greatly shaped by Western influences.

As a body of scholarship reveals, due to the oppressiveness of traditional Chinese Confucian ideology and Communist politics, queer voices, especially lesbian desires, used to be silenced in modern China until the late 1970s (e.g., Farrer 2002; Jeffreys 2006). Since 1979, the Chinese government's opening-up policy to the outside world, especially toward the West, has "led to an influx of all kinds of publications and other materials from overseas" (Wan 2001, 49). Correspondingly, it also brought about an enhanced access for Chinese people to Western information about queer movements (Wan 2001). Many concepts related to queer activism commonly used by non-heterosexual people in today's mainland China were adopted from the West (Chou 2001; Hinsch 1990; Zhang 2009).

As some scholars argue, in the context of heterosexually-structured societies, non-mainstream sexualities and desires can turn out to be a serious threat to the ideologically-normalized heterosexuality in these heterocentric worlds (e.g., Cohen 1999; Gross 2001). Expressions and causes related to Chinese queerness, in consequence, undoubtedly touch on the Chinese government's "political sensitivity" (Wan 2001, 56). The Chinese government believes that the ever-increasing queer visibility on the Internet and in mass media could expose a broader range of Chinese people to this assumed rebellious culture. As a result, both queer representations in mainstream media and queer communication online are severely censored in China.

A lot of research reveals that mainstream media and official literary records in contemporary China rarely mention queerness or refer to it in a positive way (e.g., Gross 2003, 267; Wan 2001, 49; Zhang 2009, 10). Entertainment media images and representations of queer people in mainland China are also constantly distorted and related to moral aberration and corruption (Chou 2001; Zhang 2009). Although, in recent years, some Chinese independent lesbian movies have been produced, they have never been officially released to the general public in mainland China but only appeared at foreign film festivals (Chen & Chen 2007, 116). While scholarly research has been done on queerness in China, little of the literature particularly mentions lesbianism (Chen & Chen 2007, 118).

Also, some Western scholars claim that the freedom and anonymity provided by virtual spaces not only protect queers from being discriminated against for their minority sexualities in the off-line world but also help them effectively gain access to all aspects of queer culture, construct queer identity, and find emotional support on a global scale (e.g., Amberson 2008; Barnhurst 2007, Berry & Martin 2000, Gross 2001, Gross 2003). This sanguine way to investigate online global queer culture hardly captures the discriminatory and normative aspects of slash activity in cyberspace. My project brings a different perspective into the analysis of queer virtual spaces. By showing *FSCN* fans' contradictory construction and understanding of lesbianism in slash activity, I ultimately suggest that online slash fandom can be perceived as a creative space for queer performances but not as a queer utopia without discrimination and marginalization.

Throughout my project, I introduce a more complicated phenomenon than previous scholarship on slash culture has suggested. The increasingly popular online slash activity in China cannot be simplified as the equivalent of Western slash or BL/GL cultures. Online Chinese slash fandom affords a space to study the intersecting of gender, sexuality, nationality, fan culture, and globalization in a larger transnational context. Accordingly, my research emphasizes the significance of recognizing the invisible, normative, stereotypical perspectives about same-sex desires in Chinese slash culture.

Method

In examining this online fan culture, I employ discourse analysis to examine the slash activities of the *FSCN* forum. Some previous research claims that the majority of the fans involved in *SG* fandoms, in *FSCN*, or even in Chinese BL/GL fandoms at large are young, highly-educated females in China (e.g., Yue & Yu 2008; Yang & Bao 2012). Yet, I do not completely agree with this point. As some Western literature on online queer communication has already argued, it is difficult to find out the off-line, real identities of the online participants in that virtual identities are often performative and fictional (Busse 2006; Hanmer 2010). Besides, based upon my own observation of *FSCN* forum, there exist slash fans who self-claim to be male or very young and thus less educated. According to *FSCN* participants' own, online, alleged locations in the physical world, Chinese fans from all over the world can also be found in this slash fandom. In addition, some of the fans are even homophobic or unfriendly to self-identified lesbians. Therefore, my research cannot accurately specify the

demographics of the participants of *FSCN* slash activity. Instead, I see the diversity, mobility, and performativity of the fans' online gender, sexual, and cultural interests and identities as fluid elements of the cultural discourse within virtual fandom. Using discourse analysis, my project shows how these intriguing characteristics of *SG* fans further render its online slash fandom a convoluted cultural arena.

My analysis focuses on the online discourses in which *FSCN* fans negotiate with local normative cultures within online, non-mainstream social and cultural spaces. I seek to reveal how complex discourses regarding gender and sexuality play out within this slash fandom. By presenting discourse analyses of both slash narratives and general fan discourse on *FSCN*, my research accounts for the intricate social and cultural struggles that have transformed Chinese slash culture in an Internet age. To start with, I investigate in what way *FSCN* fans posit lesbian characters and work out lesbian relationships in fictional slash narratives. Then, I explore the cultural discourse in which the fans negotiate with mainstream ideologies, normative stances, and queer desires. I pay attention to how the real-world lesbian topics including nonfictional lesbian rumors about some androgynous *SG* celebrities are dealt with by *FSCN* fans.

Fiske points out that discourse is always "a social product" (1996, 4), "a terrain of struggle" (1996, 5), and a meaning-making and re-circulating process (1996, 6). As he elaborates, discourse is "language in social use; language accented with its history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the social conditions of its use and its users: it is politicized, power-bearing language employed

to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community" (Fiske 1996, 3). Thus,

an analysis of discourse is the best way to reveal the interests of a community and the

power relationships embedded in it. Michel Foucault also concurs that discourse is

where "power and knowledge are joined together" (1990, 100). Seen in this light,

discourse is not just a means to disseminate information but, more importantly, a

process of promoting certain kinds of power and knowledge.

Certainly, Fiske's and Foucault's accounts of discourse are limited to Western

societies. Yet, these points can explain why discourse analysis is a proper way to

examine the processes in which online Chinese sexual and cultural minorities create

meanings out of mainstream information and redistribute these meanings in virtual

spaces. In today's virtual environment, the expressions and circulations of discursive,

non-mainstream desires of certain local areas become more complex than ever before.

These voices of struggles are constantly shaped and inevitably restrained by local

social realities, national cultural identities, and global imaginings. Thus, it is

necessary to study these complicated discourses in which the groups of people

marginalized by dominant discourses fight to promote their own voices but

simultaneously conform to certain repressive ideas that keep othering, rejecting, and

silencing their own cultures. The slash narratives and queer gossip created and

circulated within online Chinese fandom are not just imaginative texts but discursive

practices that reflect the complexities of the social and cultural shapings of queer

popular culture in contemporary China. An exploration of cultural discourses within

online Chinese slash fandom offers insights into the understanding of how queer

knowledge is presented, consumed, appropriated, and discursively constructed under the influence of a wide array of dominant and subordinated powers.

There has been a body of Western scholarship theorizing gender and sexuality as discursive formations. For instance, as Adrienne Rich states, heterosexuality is not a personal choice or sexual preference but "a political institution" that aims to oppress all women (1986, 313). Rather than defining sexuality as a personal attribute, Foucault (1990) understands sexuality as a cultural production and challenges the fixed categorization of sexual identities. Judith Butler echoes this problematization of the naturalizing of certain categories of gender and sexuality by arguing that "[gender] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. … [It should be considered] an ongoing discursive practice…[that] open[s] to intervention and resignification" (1990, 25-33). Moreover, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that queer identity should be seen as "a strategy for the production of meaning and being" (1993, 11). In this vein, my project on *FSCN* cultural discourse uncovers how Chinese dominant, heterocentric ideologies are interwoven with the fans' reconfiguration of gender and sexuality in queer imaginative spaces.

By viewing mediated figures as discursive constructs of already-existing multiple discourses, Fiske has employed discourse analysis to show how dominant cultural and political discourses are reworked and re-presented in popular culture (1996). Take, for example, the TV show *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998). In Fiske's terms, it served as "a discursive relay station" that assimilated, reproduced, and re-circulated the preexisting conventions of family values (1996, 24). I follow this

way of understanding popular culture by applying Fiske's theory to my own discourse

analysis of *FSCN* forum. My research conceives online slash activity as a discourse

event in Chinese popular culture. I see both fictional characters and real celebrities

being fantasized about in Chinese slash fandom as mediated figures that reflect

subordinated fan groups' struggles within dominant cultural discourses. My analysis

seeks to detail the ways Chinese slash fans queerly imagine and discuss these

mediated figures. Based upon my discourse analysis, I maintain that these queer

meaning-making processes in online slash fandom are where dominant cultural values

and subordinated voices fight for power.

Chapter Breakdown

There are four chapters in my project. In the following two chapters, I present

my discourse analysis of *FSCN* forum.

In Chapter 2, I focus my analysis on the imaginary lesbianism in *FSCN* slash

fictions that is partially drawn from the intentionally "queered" content of *SG*. Firstly,

I analyze the media and cultural discourses around *SG* itself, revealing the queer

potential of *SG* that is exploited by its producers and later articulated by its slash fans.

Moreover, by analyzing some *FSCN* fictions about the lesbian romances of *SG*

celebrities, I examine how the fans queerly narrate fictional stories about these

Chinese celebrities. I pay close attention to the ways *FSCN* fans appropriate certain

heterosexual gender-role patterns and culturally distant settings to construct

lesbianism in slash fictions. I elucidate that these characteristics of *FSCN* slash

writing are representative of the cultural contestations between the fans' queer desires,

mainstream images, normative hegemony, and the repressive realities of Chinese society.

In Chapter 3, I concentrate my analysis on the general, fannish cultural discourse that embodies the ways *FSCN* fans queerly read *SG* celebrities as constructed, media figures yet simultaneously struggle with and resist nonfictional lesbian implications surrounding both the celebrities and the fans themselves. Firstly, by introducing the intricate identity discourse of *SG* slash fans in cyberspace, I uncover the different ways the fans express their desiring voices for the *SG* androgynous celebrities in mainstream and slash fandoms. In so doing, I reveal how *FSCN* functions as an online closet for some *SG* queer fans to express their non-mainstream desires while maintaining normative identities within online mainstream environments. Moreover, I show how real-world lesbian topics are downplayed and/or eliminated by *FSCN* fans during queer gossip. By means of this, I demonstrate that *FSCN* is not an uncontested, queer utopia. Rather, it is fraught with conflicts and struggles between queer and normative cultures.

The last chapter is the concluding part of my project. In this chapter, I summarize all the findings and arguments engendered through my examination of *FSCN* fandom. Also, I talk about the cultural significance and implications of my research on online Chinese slash fandom. Finally, I provide suggestions about further research directions, possibilities, and methods in the field of Chinese slash study.

Chapter 2

Lesbian Romances in *FSCN* Slash Fiction

The explosion of online fans' queer readings, writings, and discussions about the romantic and sexual relationships of celebrities and the characters they portray in media is hard to ignore. A few researchers have attributed the rise in popularity of online slash activity worldwide to the potential of virtual slash fandom to allow fans to express their subversive voices and to obtain self-esteem and senses of belonging (e.g., Hanmer 2010; Yang & Bao 2012). Yet, online slash activity is not a simple matter of resisting mainstream culture and empowering underprivileged groups. Instead, it is an active site that is fueled by fans' tangled, contradictory desires: to explore queer connotations of the primary text, to unfetter the restraints of normative realities, and to legitimate their slash activity within mainstream, social and cultural environments. Thus, the assumed renegade potential of online slash fandom for the self-empowerment of gender, sexual, and cultural minorities is worth sophisticated examinations. In contrast to the optimistic view of online slash fandom as a non-hegemonic, anti-normative, utopian site, my project sees it as a location for negotiating fictional queer desires, the hegemony and normativity of gender and sexuality, and the repressive realities of gender and sexual politics.

There has been a proliferation of online Chinese femslash sites for expressing queer desires and conveying alternative interests in media and cultural representations of lesbianism. The *FSCN* forum devoted to the 2006 *SG* contestants is an excellent example in this regard. In this chapter, I center my analysis on *FSCN* slash fiction.

Firstly, I introduce the implicit queer discourse of *SG* articulated by its online slash

fans on *FSCN*. Furthermore, I critically examine the ways the fans narrate lesbian

romances about the androgynous 2006 *SG* contestants. Using a few influential *FSCN*

slash stories devoted to some popular *SG* contestants as examples, I explore the

cultural discourses of fannish, fictional lesbian fantasies in which the prevailing

textual maneuvers of the fan fictions can be interpreted as the fans' struggling with

mainstream media discourses, normative Chinese culture, and oppressive realities

while constructing fictional lesbian fantasies. In so doing, I strive to explain how and

why *FSCN* fans prefer to employ certain gender-role patterns and culturally distant

settings to construct lesbianism in their fictional narratives.

My findings ultimately indicate that, although Chinese fans indulge their

non-mainstream craving for queer fantasies online, their slash writing is fraught with

contradictions. Rather than an outright queer challenge to heteronormativity or an

escapist, queer fantasy genre, *FSCN* fiction is an intricate embodiment of the fans'

articulations of queer fantasies, their compliance with patriarchal and normative

assumptions of lesbianism as derivative to and imitative of traditional heterosexual

relationships, and their struggle to narrate fictional lesbian romances within the

current, repressive Chinese context.

The "Queered" *SG* and Its Online Slash Fandom *FSCN*

As I have briefly implied in chapter 1, *SG* producers' queer exploitation of its

contestants perpetuates its fans' androgyny mania. As Jenkins (1992) says, "there is

already some degree of compatibility between the ideological construction of the text

and the ideological commitments of the fans" (34). *SG*'s acceptance and highly visible profiling of androgynous contestants is likely a discursive tactic of its producers to promote, dramatize, and sensationalize the show. As argued by Graeme Turner, while the major goal of reality TV is to make a profit, celebrities created by the shows are just "profitable by-product[s]" (2004, 54). Reality TV always looks for people who can "project a personality on television" and who "are more usefully ordinary than others" (Bonner 2003, 53). *SG* contestants' androgyny, in this sense, unexpectedly became a "useful," profitable thing to explore. Seeing business opportunities from the audience's supportive of and even fanatic reactions to these androgynous females, the producers have highlighted the androgyny of the contestants and have queerly paired some androgynous contestants to deliberately make news and create strong public interest.

For example, Yuchun Li has an obvious tomboyish voice, personality, and look. During the competition, she always wore manly shirts and loose jeans. During the national competition, Li was asked to perform a love song for heterosexual couples, *You Are the Most Precious* (*Ni Zui Zhen Gui* in Chinese), with her "best friend" Liangying Zhang, who is a traditionally feminine, curvaceous girl. In the beginning of the song, Li and Zhang were holding each other's hands like a couple. With an ambiguous tone, Li said to the audience, "Please support my friend Liangying Zhang, because her voice is as beautiful as her figure." This queer pairing of Li and Zhang on the show greatly encouraged the emergence of YuLiang slash fans online.[11]

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[11] YuLiang refers to the first names of Yuchun Li and Liangying Zhang.

Likewise, the show often divides its contestants into two groups in terms of their gender performances. Teams of professional clothes designers and make-up artists are hired by the show to help the contestants with their outfits and personal appearance. While the androgynous ones are required to cut their hair shorter and wear boyish costumes, the feminine ones usually have long hair and wear traditional skirts. During the course of the competition, each tomboyish contestant is frequently "coupled" with a feminine one to perform a song or to live in the same hotel room.

Moreover, the producers often queerly exploit the real-life, off-screen relationships between the androgynous contestants and their female friends. The contestants' female friends are frequently invited to the live studio and performing with the contestants in varying intimate ways on the show. For instance, before participating in the singing competition, the 2006 winner Wenjie Shang used to be an office lady who worked in a foreign company in Shanghai. Her boss is a beautiful, elegant, young woman who showed up at the scene of the show multiple times, and was invited to talk about Shang on the show and even rumored to live with Shang. During Shang's regional competition, her boss was sitting under the stage to support Shang. At the moment when Shang started to sing, her boss was given a long close-up showing that she was so moved by Shang's performance that she almost burst into tears. Besides, a few popular androgynous contestants, such as Liyang Liu, are allowed to invite their female friends who have a very noticeable tomboyish style to be interviewed on-stage during the live broadcast.

In addition, there are many quite dramatic relationships presented on the show.

Take, for example, the bittersweet friendship exhibited between two very popular

contestants from 2006, Liyang Liu and Wenjie Shang. Both of them made the final

round of the competition that year. Shang went on to win the contest, and Liu was

second runner-up. They had become friends and shared a hotel room since the

preliminary selection round; however, they needed to compete ruthlessly against each

other in the final round. This kind of "performed" bittersweet friendship between the

contestants is not uncommon on *SG*. The constructed, intense homosocial bonds

throughout the course of the competition also existed between other androgynous

contestants, such as Yuchun Li and Jie He in 2005, Bichang Zhou and Yali Huang in

2005, and Fei Xu and Na Li in 2006.

Through these "designed" homosocial plots, not only the androgynous personas

of some contestants but also the intimate relationships between the contestants are

further "queered." Certainly, the show's producers have never acknowledged that they

intend to create any homosocial bonds between *SG* contestants. In fact, sometimes

when the homosocial performances of the contestants overstep, the producers call

them off. In one episode of the 2009 national competition, one androgynous

contestant, Yike Zeng, was forced to compete with her "best friend," Chen Pan, who

is a traditionally feminine girl. During the competition, neither of them was willing to

see the other being eliminated. When the public judges were voting for their

performances, Pan, the more sentimental one, could not stop crying. In order to

comfort her, Zeng kissed Pan on her lips for several seconds during the live broadcast.

Realizing that this kissing scene was too "Brokeback (*Duan Bei* in Chinese)" (QQ

2009), the producers immediately switched the broadcast to commercials to cover it up. Yet, many audience members present in the live studio recorded the scene and posted it online. There was also a lot of media coverage given to this *SG* "lesbian" kiss afterwards. Of course, these unconventional gender and sexual performances can also be said to be the contestants' own choices. Yet, after the show ended, some of the most popular androgynous contestants have turned back to their feminine, "normal" looks. In view of this, some cynical fans have speculated that the androgynous personas of many *SG* contestants were just a special kind of "publicity gimmick" (*Chao Zuo* in Chinese) to attract the attention and participation of the public (e.g., xuxiaoduo77 2009).

These complex cultural and media discourses not only have shaped *SG* into an implicitly "queered" media form but also have given rise to its staggeringly large numbers of online slash fandoms. Numerous slash fan sites devoted to this show have been built since 2005. Since 2006, slash writings and queer gossip about the *SG* contestants have flooded Chinese cyberspace. Because of its wide-ranging focus on multiple pairings in the 2006 *SG*, *FSCN* became one of the most prominent *SG* slash forums. It was built in May 2006 by a slash fan of the 2005 *SG* androgynous celebrities (Yang & Bao 2012, 9). The fans on *FSCN* have never explicitly declared that the site is designed for slash activity about *SG* contestants. But its name, *Fei Se Chao Nv*, literally means "sex scandals" between *SG* contestants and thereby discloses the queer essence of all the fan activities on it. The most remarkable aspect of the *FSCN* forum is its staggeringly large quantity of threads devoted to original slash

fanfic creation and queer gossip about the "sex scandals" of *SG* pairings.

Slash Writing on *FSCN*

It is hard to determine why an outburst of original slash fanfic writing started on *FSCN* in 2006 and carried on into 2010. Yet, some Western fan scholars have shown that fans use slash activity to expand and explore the underlying world hinted at by mainstream media (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992, 45; Jenkins 1992, 176). By queerly constructing and intensifying the friendships between females, *SG* discursively manufactures some of its androgynous contestants as "on-screen" queer hybrids that imply "the way that gender bending and non-normative sexualities can denaturalize and transgress" rigid gender and sexuality divisions (Friedman 1998, 77). According to some research (e.g., Yang & Bao 2012), *FSCN* fans are well-aware of the flood of quasi-homo relationships on *SG* as a manipulation by *SG* producers to dramatize the competition. Yet, they take advantage of the queer meanings of the show to create their own versions of lesbian romances. Slash writing is a major way for the fans to celebrate these queer hybrids and elaborate the underlying queer world suggested by *SG*. The majority of the slash stories on the forum are centered on the already-established, homosocial bonds between certain androgynous *SG* celebrities in the primary text and exclusively confined to queerly transforming these on-screen pairings into fictional homoerotic relationships.

There are many different ways to categorize slash fanfic genres on *FSCN*. While "sweet literature" (*Tian Wen* in Chinese) features lesbian romances with relaxing storylines and happy endings; "torturing literature" (*Nue Wen* in Chinese) has

a great resemblance to Western dark romance that is full of dramatic, intense plots. Also, the fans categorize stories without explicit erotic depictions as "clean water literature" (*Qing Shui Wen* in Chinese). The ones with heavy portrayals of sexual intimacy are classified as "H literature" (*H Wen* in Chinese).[12] Moreover, the stories that do not situate the paired characters within the contexts of *SG* but relocate them in other, distant, fictional settings are named *Jia Kong* literature.[13]

There is a tradition of *FSCN* slash writers to designate the pairing in the title of the thread where the story is posted. For instance, some stories focusing on the pairing of two androgynous contestants, Fei Xu and Na Li, are marked as FeiXue (F/X hereafter).[14] The ones about the pairing of Liyang Liu and Wenjie Shang are usually marked as YangShang (Y/S hereafter) literature.[15] Most *FSCN* slash fictions are devoted to the two most popular pairings: F/X and Y/S. This may be explained by the high profile of their relationships as exhibited on the show. The fans often refer to these pairings promoted by *SG* as "official couplings" (*Guan Pei* in Chinese). Since the show presented a more dramatic, intense relationship between Liu and Shang than the one between Xu and Li, fiction about the coupling of Liu and Shang is predominant.

The order of the names of the characters in the title often discloses a *Gong*/*Shou* (initiator/receiver) division in the pairing. The binarism of *Gong/Shou* roles in homo-pairings are borrowed from Japanese BL culture to refer to binary sex roles in

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[12] The use of H is based upon a Japanese word "hentai" and it means erotica (Yang 2010).

[13] *Jia Kong* is a word directly borrowed from Japanese language. In Chinese, it is used to refer to the act to create fictive worlds in media. Thus, I do not translate it into English here.

[14] *Xue* refers to the nickname of Li, Xiaoxue.

[15] *Yang* is used to refer to Liu's first name, Liyang.

slash narratives. The pairing of Y/S, for example, implies that Liu is the dominant one in their lesbian relationship, while Shang is the passive one. To the contrary, S/Y stories depict Shang as the initiator and Liu as the receiver.

As Yang and Bao observe, "the change of sex roles in the pairing is not unusual" (2012, 11). Indeed, there are many *FSCN* stories that invert the sex roles of the characters. The fan readers also seem to be excited to see this kind of story. S/Y stories are not hard to find on *FSCN*. A few fictions marked as both Y/S and S/Y allow Liu and Shang to switch their dominant/passive roles. Some fictions are marked as chaotic couplings (*Luan Pei* or *Luan CP* in Chinese). In this genre, more unlikely, nontraditional pairings, such as romances between two tomboyish characters, can be constructed. The writers of the chaotic couplings genre usually narrate multiple lesbian relationships for the same character, which enables that character to change her sex roles in her different romances.

FSCN slash writing not only articulates the queer aspect of *SG* but also highlights the fluid and performative natures of gender and sexuality by allowing the characters to play unfixed sex roles in lesbian romantic/sexual relationships. In the process of exploring gender and sexuality variations in diverse kinds of *FSCN* fictions, the naturalized divisions of gender and sexuality in heterosexual hegemony are demystified and challenged. Nonetheless, slash narratives do not necessarily guarantee a radical break with normative culture (Jenkins 1992; Ng 2008). For instance, *FSCN* fans' lesbian portrayals often draw on the normative positioning of androgynous females and lesbian relationships as emulations of "patriarchally

heterosexualized" gender identities and relations (Doty 1993, 82). This tendency of

FSCN slash writing renders its lesbian romances mixed representations of queer and

normative interpretations of non-heterosexual females' desires and identities.

Heteronormalized Lesbianism in *FSCN* Slash Fiction

Much of *FSCN* slash fiction shows a blending of a queer challenge to

heterocentric and patriarchal hegemony and a normative view of lesbianism as an

imitation of heterosexuality. Although the writers attempt to portray non-hegemonic

sexual expressions and transgressive gender performances, they often simplify

butch/femme identities to a masculine/feminine division and rebuild a gendered

power difference within the lesbian pairings. This contradictory construction of

lesbianism divulges the fans' struggle between their queer imaginations and

mainstream, normative culture.

A Case Study of **FSS**

The long Y/S novel *Fei Se Shi* (*FSS* hereafter), known for its explicit portrayals

of the intimate relationship between Liu and Shang, is the most sensational story on

FSCN. It was originally posted on *FSCN* in November 2006 by one very active *SG*

slash writer Clockwork Orange 521 (CO521 hereafter).[16] After five years, the *FSS*

thread had more than 10,000 responses. Even now, nearly six years later, there still are

many fan readers discussing and commenting on it online.

FSS portrays an incestuous relationship between Liu and Shang over 18 years.

In this nontraditional story, the two are depicted as half-sisters sharing the same

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[16] The author's user name is *Fa Tiao Cheng 521* in Chinese. CO521 has written both male/male slash and femslash fictions.

biological father. Yet, their parents kept this truth from them. When the two were 12 years old, Shang's mother got remarried to Liu's father. Since then, Liu and Shang were brought up together as step-sisters and had special feelings for each other. After they have grown up and experienced untold sufferings, the two decide to face their feelings and live together as a lesbian couple. Shortly after that, they discover their biological relation. Full of remorse, Shang runs away from Liu without a word, eventually settling down with a fake identity in Tibet. Meanwhile, Liu starts off on her journey to look for Shang. In the sequel to *FSS*, Liu and Shang eventually reunite and get back together in a heaven-like place in Tibet.[17]

As a slash fiction, *FSS* is queer in essence. By depicting an incestuous, lesbian love story between two persons who can't stop loving each other even after their biological sisterhood is revealed, it throws the alleged legitimacy of heterosexuality in mainstream culture into crisis. However, some hegemonic and normative concepts of gender and sexuality continue to undergird the lesbian relationship in *FSS*. For instance, Shang's femme lesbian identity is constructed through a normative imagining of traditional femininity. Shang's non-hegemonic androgyny in her adolescence is dealt with as an immature, passing phase, while her heterosexually feminine, curvaceous outward appearance after she grows up is depicted as a sign of her transition into being an attractive, mature, femme lesbian. This normative modifying of lesbian identities and relationships is best revealed by the sexual violence in *FSS*.

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[17] *FSS* has an incomplete "sequel" (*Fan Wai* in Chinese). Due to some unclear reason, the author, CO521, stopped writing it in early 2007 and claimed that there was only one more chapter to be written.

As a classic H and torturing fiction on *FSCN*, *FSS* is fraught with a large

number of erotic scenes and plots of S/M, rape, and sexual violence between the two

characters. A corpus of literature argues that representations of sexual violence in

multiple media can be seen as a romantic element to explore the sexual tension

between pleasure and danger (Caudill 2003, 35; Levine 2007, 224; Palmer 1999, 118).

As Tania Modleski points out, "[t]he rapist mentality" in romance rape scenes is

sexual desire "disguised as the intention to dominate and hurt" (1984, 35). In slash

fiction, in particular, rape and S/M sex scenes can be categorized as extreme cases of

the hurt/comfort genre that tend to reveal the emotional closeness and the physical

attraction between the characters (Bacon-Smith 1992, 262). As Helen Caudill

elaborates, the sexual tension is what "the TV show hints and that the [slash] fan

fiction inhabits and explores" (2003, 38). The violent scenes in slash fictions can help

the characters' "attraction, love and sexual need for each other to be expressed openly.

And in turn, that expression transforms the threat of sexual violence into consensual

lovemaking" (Caudill 2003, 35). I do not disagree with these ideas. In fact, there are

many other *FSCN* fictions featuring the sexually violent scenes between Liu and

Shang, such as another very famous Y/S story, *No Angel* (Shi Jin Er Yao A 2008). The

intense, "bittersweet" relationship between Liu and Shang in the final competition

may encourage the fans' preference for these "torturing," violent plots. The explicit

portrayal of sexual violence in the fictions can be considered a writing strategy to

erotically explore the homosocial tension between Liu and Shang. Yet, the explicitly

erotic and sexually violent scenes in *FSS* also present an unequal relationship within

the imagined lesbian romance, which epitomizes the complexities of *FSCN* slash

writing as a location for both a queer subverting of heterosexuality and a normative

recasting of patriarchally-defined gender relations within fictional lesbianism.

Through the portrayal of this violent sexual relationship, the author reproduces

a gender hierarchy within lesbian relationships. In the depictions of erotic moments

between the two characters, Shang is portrayed to be a virgin who is always sexually

passive, submissive, and awkward; while Liu is an experienced, aggressive,

butch-identity lesbian due to her sexual promiscuity over the years. In the rape and

S/M scenes, Shang, as the receiver in this lesbian relationship, is forcibly seduced,

tortured, tied up, and/or raped. Certainly, these violent plots are not driven by hostility.

Instead, in the process, both of the characters' erotic fulfillment and gratification are

infused with mixed feelings of despair, guilt, shame, and self-destruction. It is the

violent sex that makes the complex emotions of the two so vividly presented to the

reader. However, as Foucault says, as a sex game, S/M "is a strategic relation, because

it is always fluid…. [T]here are roles [in S/M], but … those roles can be reversed"

(Macey citing Foucault 1993, 368). Not only does the reversing of roles in sexual

violence barely happen in *FSS*, but also the violent sex between the two always works

as a way for the initiator Liu to release intense emotions. As a result, Liu's sexual

dominance and power is reinforced while the passive sex role played by Shang is

constantly repressed and treated as inferior.

The most famous rape scene between the two characters happens right after Liu

misunderstands Shang's ambiguous friendship with her boss. Liu's outright

penetration in the rape scene is an ultimate symbol that exerts her sexual power over Shang. Likewise, the S/M scene happens after Liu finds out about their biological relation. The dominant, abusive role Liu takes in the sexual degradation of Shang expresses her great frustration with their incestuous relationship. After the sexual abuse, Liu breaks up with Shang. Although she is not depicted as taking pleasure in humiliating and abusing Shang, she does not take the initiative to comfort Shang's pain, either. On the contrary, Shang blames herself for their break-up. In order to attract Liu's attention and get back with Liu, she tries every means to heterosexually feminize herself, such as extending her hair, and wearing skirts and high heels.

Some BL scholars claim that it is a heterosexist understanding of gender that equates being penetrated with disempowerment and feminization (e.g., Wood 2006). Nonetheless, the aggressive sex scenes in *FSS* help the initiator gain a sense of control and security by actualizing the initiator's aggressive sexual power over the receiver. The passive one in this sexual relationship is not only disempowered and traditionally feminized but also subordinated and silenced. Rather than presenting an egalitarian love that achieves mutuality on an emotional level, the sexual violence in *FSS* shows a heteronormative reconstruction of lesbian romance that emulates male primacy and female subordination in heterosexual relationships. This part of the story is misogynist and heterosexist and eventually mainstreams a gender hierarchy of the heterocentric world in imagined lesbian romances. It casts doubt on the potential of slash writing to overturn the disempowered positions of women and sexual minorities in normative, patriarchal Chinese society. This contradictory way to construct lesbianism also exists

in some fictions reversing the sex roles in the pairing.

The Sex Roles in **FSCN** *Fiction*

Some studies believe that the reversing of sex roles in slash fictions showcases a transgressing of rigid dominant/passive identity constructs (e.g., Wood 2006). Yet, most of the time, the transgressiveness of *FSCN* slash writing is temporary. The fans deem the switching of the sex roles of the two characters in one pairing as a form of "*Fan Pu*" (Push him/her over in turn). This term refers to the passive partner actively initiating sex with the dominant one. Rather than an identity that fundamentally defies conventionally-constructed gendered roles and power relations, it is a fleeting moment designed for erotic excitement.

There are some *FSCN* writers of the S/Y genre attempting to switch the dominant/passive roles assigned to the pairing of Liu and Shang. Take, for example, the S/Y story, *Lure into Surrender* (Jiao Shen Me Dou Shi Cuo 2009a).[18] Shang is depicted as an androgynous police officer who is independent, decisive, and brave. Her character seems to be more androgynous than traditionally feminine. The author promises that, rather than a temporary *Fan Pu*, this story allows Shang to become an "authentic" initiator in their relationship (Jiao Shen Me Dou Shi Cuo 2009b). Nonetheless, a heterosexually-framed lesbian relationship and a traditional gender demarcation are still central to the pairing in this fiction.

Shang is portrayed to own many characteristics associated with traditional femininity, such as being tender, nurturing, caring, and domestic. The tomboyish one

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[18] The Chinese Title of this fiction is *You Xiang*.

in their relationship, Liu, is an aggressive, defiant, cynical womanizer who is attracted to very feminine women. Both of the two used to have plenty of female casual sexual partners and did not treat relationships seriously. This positioning of lesbian females transcends the rigid barriers between male masculinity and female femininity. And the sexually permissive attitude of both characters contravenes the traditional, passive role of females in sexual relationships assigned by patriarchal culture. But the only difference between Shang and Liu in terms of their permissiveness is that Shang used to be a lonely, affectionate person who looked for emotional comfort while Liu was a sexually aggressive, attractive player who was only interested in sex and treated sexual partners like garbage. In this way, the sexual attitude of the feminine one in the lesbian relationship is automatically relegated to the realm of emotional need, while the permissiveness of the tomboyish one is attributed to her masculinized sex drive.

The story gives more detailed portrayals of Liu's promiscuous relationships with multiple, feminine women than Shang's. While portraying the butch lesbian as sexually active and aggressive troubles a heteronormative gender binary, addressing her heartless role and promiscuous behavior in sexual relationships actually reveals a disempowering, subordinating, and victimizing of the feminine in lesbian romances. In contrast, the author's intended dominant role for Shang is thinly shown through a vague, short description of the only sexual encounter between the two characters. Their first kiss is initiated by Liu. The actual lesbian sex is not explicitly described but is revealed by Liu's recall the next morning when the author unmasks their reversed sex roles by having Liu handcuffed to the bed. Contradictory to what the writer

promised, the changing of sex roles and the subverting of the power inequality in this lesbian romance remain transient.

This fiction defiantly rejects heterosexual-dominant society by portraying a lesbian utopia where heterosexual relationships and characters become marginal. The nontraditional gender and sexual identities of the two characters and the fluidity of the sex roles the two play during sexual intimacy are disruptive to normative culture. Yet, most parts of the story recasts heterosexual sex-role patterns and gender stereotypes within lesbian sexual relationships. The linking of the sexual performances and attitudes of butch/femme lesbians with the hegemonic conventions of masculinity/femininity implies a normative understanding of "butch-as-heterosexualized male and femme-as-heterosexualized female" (Doty 1993, 89). In this way, the fiction tends to consider butch lesbian as "a substitute for … the opposite gender" and to express queerness through a "heterosexualized cross-gender identification" (Doty 1993, 82-89).

It is true that writing and reading fictional lesbian romances are only ways for the fans to express and experience queer fantasies. Both heterosexual romance researchers and authors argue that romance readers can tell the difference between reality and fantasy (e.g., Krentz 1992; Phillips 1992). Hence, the writers and readers of these fannish stories are not necessarily desirous of lesbianism that reproduces heterosexual gender hierarchy and stereotypes. Romance fictions have been said to only "offe[r] readers an escape from reality" (Phillips 1992, 54; Parameswaran 2002). Yet, even if these lesbian romantic fictions do function as a pure escape for the fans,

the preference of the fans for lesbian stories featuring normative and hegemonic

elements is still problematic.

These contradictory constructions of fictional lesbianism in *FSCN* slash stories

can be ascribed to the fans' own conflicting understandings of lesbian desires,

identities, and relationships that are shaped by and negotiated with normative culture's

construction of heteronormalized lesbianism. The contradiction might partially result

from the ways *SG* formulates its androgynous contestants and their homosocial

relationships. For example, throughout the course of competition, while Liu often

cross-dressed as a male and perform songs for men on the stage, Shang was allowed

to show her effeminate side and sing soft, women's songs. Although both Liu and

Shang generally have an androgynous appearance, *SG* often framed their relationship

in a heterosexual way. In the final competition round, for instance, they were asked to

wear Chinese red silk costumes. While Liu's dress resembled a man's suit; Shang's

dress was better tailored to accentuate the curves of her figure. When they stood next

to each other singing, some fans joked that they looked like a heterosexual couple

wearing traditional Chinese wedding dress. As argued by Dyer, "casting gay

relationships and characters in terms of heterosexual sex roles" is a means to

legitimate dominant culture by stereotyping subordinated people (2006, 356). *SG*'s

heteronormalizing of androgynous identities and homosocial bonds, therefore,

upholds heterosexual hegemony while sensationalizing this show. *FSCN* fans may

uncritically internalize this normative framing and further apply it to their own slash

narratives.

Also, Janice Radway explains that "[t]he romantic fantasy is … not a fantasy about discovering a uniquely interesting life partner, but a ritual wish to be cared for, loved, and validated in a particular way" (1991, 83). In this respect, the integrating of normative and hegemonic elements into lesbian romances may reflect the fans' struggles to realize queer fantasies in a patriarchal, heterocentric cultural context. While queerly interpreting mainstream culture within such a male- and heterosexual-dominant society, the fans might feel compelled to "defend" and "normalize" lesbian fantasies by incorporating certain stereotypes of gender and sexuality into slash narratives. Thus, the contradictory imaginings of fictional lesbianism that challenge the status of centralized heterosexuality yet heteronormalize lesbian relationships and mimic heterosexual gender inequality, are the writers' reconciliation, either consciously or unconsciously, of normative culture and their queer explorations of mainstream images. This paradoxical situation of the fans queerly reading a heterocentric, patriarchal culture can be better demonstrated by the use of culturally distant settings in the *Jia Kong* slash genre.

Marginalized Lesbianism in *Jia Kong* Literature

Most stories on *FSCN* are *Jia Kong* stories. Due to the final, cruel competition between the contestants presented on the show, slash fans seem committed to using the *Jia Kong* genre to break the constraints of the canon and reclaim the homoerotic connotations of the pairings in distinctive settings. *Jia Kong* slash helps remove the characters from *SG*, a media world very close to reality, and reassigns these reality TV characters to alternative occupations and identities in other fictional contexts. It

allows the writers to draw heavily on a variety of genre elements, such as crime, fantasy, historical, or science fiction.

By recasting the two characters in non-canonical contexts, Chinese *Jia Kong* literature runs parallel to a subset of Western slash fiction, "alternate universe" (AU hereafter).[19] The culturally distant settings in AU fiction, such as futuristic, historical, or fantasy contexts, remove the social and cultural pressures that must be dealt with in current realities and thereby offer slash writers great freedom for the exploration of queer possibilities (e.g., Penley 1991; Woledge 2005). Yet, this intentional distancing of lesbian romances from reality does not simply signify a "homoindifferent" (Woledge 2006) attitude of the fan writers. As Benshoff has pointed out, there is an oppressive tendency to link "queer sexuality with monstrosity" in the fandom of gothic soap opera (1998, 105). Although I do not mean to criticize a similar AU slash mode in *FSCN Jia Kong* literature for its intentional denigration and othering of lesbianism, I believe that it does represent a discursive response of the fans to the repressive reality in real-world, contemporary China. Often, this frustration of the fans with mainstream culture is encoded within relocated narrative settings of *Jia Kong* literature. In this way, the fans show an unease about the existence of non-heterosexual desires, identities, and relationships in the contemporary, heterocentric Chinese world. Thus, this AU setting in *FSCN* literature is a sophisticated writing tactic to realize queer fantasies and question heterocentric, patriarchal culture while evading being directly confronted with the oppressive reality

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[19] In some research, it is also called alternate reality or alternative world (AR or AW).

of mainstream society.

Western Plotlines

      Jia Kong stories on *FSCN* often show a tendency to borrow Western contexts to complete the development of lesbian romances, especially in the stories devoted to the pairing of Liu and Shang. This strategy is similar to a mode of Western slash fiction that utilizes "the homosocial worlds of ancient Greece and Persia" to create environments in favor of homoerotic relationships (Woledge 2006, 101). The appearance of Western storylines in *Jia Kong* slash narratives is always paired with some entry or turning points for their lesbian romantic and sexual relationships. For instance, in *FSS*, the first lesbian kiss between Liu and Shang takes place in France. By positing the two characters in a culturally distant, foreign place, the author intensifies their emotional bonding and, thus, accelerates the development of their lesbian-erotic relationship. Even in some *Jia Kong* fiction in which the development of the lesbian romance is not relocated abroad, it is often the case that at least one of the partners is imagined as having lived in a Western country earlier in her life. In these stories, the lived experiences of the characters in the west often serve as backgrounds that foreshadow their lesbian romances in China.

      Sometimes, the West is also used as a queer diaspora for non-heterosexual Chinese people to run away from the social pressures or the suffering resulting from their lesbian desires. In the plots of many *Jia Kong* stories, the romantic relationship of Liu and Shang starts in China, but is doomed to fail eventually because of social pressure. Then, one or both of them go to a Western country, such as England, France,

Greece, Italy, Canada, or Australia, to recover from the psychological trauma. The

plot then finds them either reuniting overseas and resuming their love affair after they

return to China, or meeting by chance in the West, where they settle as a happy

lesbian couple. Even in the stories without a happy ending between the two characters,

Western settings still function in a therapeutic way. Take, for example, the fiction

Plane Tree (Chou Chang Liao Wu Yi 2009).[20] In this story, realizing there is no future

for her secret lesbian love for Liu, Shang runs away and eventually settles down in

Australia, a place with similar scenery to where she met Liu for the first time. This

Australian plot offers Shang a space that not only separates her from the current,

disappointing realities in China but also allows her to reminiscence about her lesbian

past.

It is possible that these international storylines were inspired by the personal

experiences of Liu and Shang that have been promoted on the show. They both

studied in European countries and can speak multiple Western languages fluently.

Shang is a French-major college graduate, while Liu finished her undergraduate study

in England.[21] Western places with predominant French- and English-speaking

populations are frequently employed as the settings in *Jia Kong* literature. However,

the fact that in *Jia Kong* slash, Western worlds positively perpetuate lesbian desires

and are the destinations of choice for non-heterosexual people, is hardly just a direct

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[20] The Chinese title of this fiction is *Xuan Ling*.
[21] As a prestigious Chinese University graduate with major in French, Shang was said to have a good command of English, French, and German. Liu received her Bachelor degree in Advertising from a famous college in England. These foreign experiences may also explain why England and France are more frequently used as cultural settings in slash stories than other Western countries. However, the foreign backgrounds of the two cannot fully account for the prevailing appropriation of the West as a homosocial or queer-positive environment in Chinese slash fandom.

borrowing from the real-life narrative. Rather, it can be seen as a strategy of the writers to create fantasies that are less acceptable in mainstream Chinese culture and society.

Notably, a great many *Jia Kong* fictions prefer to position other *SG* celebrities in Western settings, such as Liangying Zhang in *Love Wrong, Wrong Love!* (Na Bi forever 2007), Na Li in *Shadow Gloom* (Feng Lai Feng Qu Yu Wu Hen 2007), and Jiaqing Wei in *Every Lonely Flower* (Fei Yang Yi Xia 2007). Most of these celebrities have never been abroad and/or cannot speak foreign languages at all in real life. Besides, in the following entries of one Y/S *Jia Kong* story with Western plots, *Love Likes the Tides* (Ma Li Lian. Xiong Yong 2009a), some fans wondered why the story is set in Quebec, such an unfamiliar place to Chinese fans.[22] The author responded in this way, "Quebec is the largest, French-speaking province in Canada. It is chosen [to be used in the story] is because same-sex couples can legally get married there. As a YSER (Slash fans of Y/S), we believe it represents hope" (Ma Li Lian. Xiong Yong 2009b). As can be seen from this explanation, the West, deemed as a queer-supportive world to which fans aspire, not only becomes an ideal, fantasy universe for the creation and development of fictional lesbian romances, but also helps the fans validate lesbianism that is impossible, repressed, marginalized, and denigrated in the current Chinese cultural context.

This romanticization of the West as a queer wonderland in slash writing is a result of complex contestations between the fans' queer desires and Chinese

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[22] The Chinese title of this story is *Ai Ru Chao Shui.*

hegemonic assumptions of the West and non-heterosexuality. On the one hand, it reflects a Chinese *Jia Kong* slash trope that same-sex desires are more prevalent and easily developed in Western countries and are more acceptable to people who have Western cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. The west in the fans' fantasy scenarios is culturally, politically, and socially positioned as the opposite of mainstream Chinese society to express, develop, and reminisce about same-sex desires.

This deployment might be well-explained by an Occidentalist perspective in current Chinese society that "the plentiful and prosperous Western materials civilization and its culture are considered superior to Oriental culture [by some Chinese people]; … the Western world is a heaven [to them]. [These Chinese people] seek an opportunity to pay respects to it or enjoy themselves there" (Ning 1997, 64). The erasing of queer history and representation in local Chinese media and the influx of Western queer–related information into mainland China have helped form a positive conceptual linkage of queerness with the West among Chinese people. Consequently, a valorization of a Western queer world "which is perceived as non-homophobic, care-free, and liberating" is prevalent in China (Chou 2001, 31). Especially in recent years, the blooming of media piracy in mainland China has familiarized Chinese audiences with a diversity of Western media, including queer-themed American TV shows such as *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* (e.g., Tan 2011; Yang & Bao 2012). These queer images in Western media further promote an unrealistic queer imagining of the West among most Chinese audiences, who have no

access to the real, off-screen Western worlds. Seen in this light, underlying this promotion of the valorized queer atmosphere of the West is the "backward" intolerance of mainstream Chinese society toward non-heterosexuality (Engebrestsen 2008, 99). The fans' utopian, queer imagining of the West essentially reflects their self-consciousness of mainstream Chinese society as an exclusive, heterocentric place. Even in fictional narrative, the fans tend to emancipate lesbian characters by creating a queer utopia freed from constraints of Chinese heterosexual hegemony. This narrative strategy, therefore, ultimately expresses a pessimistic view about the Chinese social and cultural realities of same-sex relationships and non-heterosexual people in the nonfictional, physical world.

On the other hand, this queer exploration of the West also suggests a tendency to use Western places and lived experiences to "naturalize" the lesbian romances between Chinese characters. The contextual naturalization of lesbianism discloses the fans' compliance with one Chinese heterocentric assumption of lesbianism as a derivative, unnatural, and culturally shaped sexuality from the West (Engebretsen 2008).

In a recent study of Chinese fans' interpretation of the American TV show *Friends*, See Kam Tan (2011, 221) recognizes that a "'we-us-Chinese-self' versus 'they-them-Westerners-other'" dichotomy is created in Chinese audiences' cross-cultural interpretations of sex- and homosexuality-related themes. Tan's (2011, 222) study exhibits that some Chinese fans possess distorted, homophobic views of homosexuality as a "contagious disease," a "'learned' behavior," and a prevalent thing

in the West. According to Tan (2011, 219), the represented life on American TV is nontraditional, sexually permissive, and unreal in terms of Chinese local realities. Thus, the mixed influences of Chinese people's self-consciousness of a unique "cultural group that had particular traditions, norms, and values … the recourse to cultural difference based on ignorance and denial," and the unfamiliar life portrayed on American TV lead to "gross generalizations of the culture of the other" among Chinese fans (2011, 221). These views of non-heterosexuality in mainstream Chinese society as derivative and deviant are frequently incorporated into *FSCN* slash writing and reflected by the fans' queer use of the West in slash narratives.

Besides, as noted by Annamarie Jagose,

> Heterosexuality, after all, has long maintained its claim to be a natural, pure and unproblematic state which requires no explanation. Indeed, in so far as many attempts to 'explain' homosexuality are grounded conceptually on heterosexuality, there is a sense in which heterosexuality is assumed to be a neutral or unmarked form of sexuality per se. (Jagose 1996, 17).

By introducing the Western cultural backgrounds, the fan writers allude to the "reasons" or the "origins" of the lesbian romances between Chinese characters. By means of this, they avoid directly challenging the self-evident status of heterosexuality in mainstream Chinese society. This narrative mode, therefore, becomes a settlement of the conflict between the fannish construction of fictional lesbianism and the mainstream Chinese context's rejecting of non-heterosexuality. It showcases the fans' own struggles to articulate queer fantasies within a cultural environment that denies the existence and legitimacy of non-heterosexuality.

Futuristic and Historical Settings

Futuristic and historical *Jia Kong* stories are not uncommon on *FSCN*. These backdrops are frequently appropriated by the fan writers to evade the current discriminations and oppressions against lesbianism and, thus, culturally legitimate their exploration of homoerotic possibilities between the characters. Since "the temporal settings have a strong influence on plotlines and the type of fantasy that is found in [romance stories]" (Linz 1992, 11), these settings seem to help the writers to complete more bold and utopian lesbian romances. Yet, such narrative settings often reflect both a subversion of heterocentric hegemony in the fictional world and the fan writers' frustration with the unpleasant situation of non-heterosexuality in contemporary China.

In one futuristic fiction, *One Thousand Years Late* (Niao Shan Ming De YS 2007), the lesbian romance takes place in the year of 3032 in which there are ongoing intergalactic wars between human, robots, and aliens.[23] The author starts the story by stating that "Now is AD 3032 on the earth. … Human civilization is on the verge of being destroyed by the rapid development of technology. … Human obtains unprecedented freedom. … [T]he so-called ethics has long been stamped out" (Niao Shan Ming De YS 2007). In such a chaotic future, love and sexual intimacy not only transcend the traditional boundaries of gender, sexuality, and species but also are sacred no more. Within this futuristic, permissive environment, the plot continues a lesbian love tragedy that failed 1000 years ago because of social pressure. The strategy of using futuristic and fantasy generic tropes to re-imagine lesbian romances

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[23] The Chinese title of this fiction is *Chi Dao Qian Nian*.

discursively troubles the centrality of heterosexuality in present human society. However, the story automatically places lesbianism in opposition to contemporary social order and morality. The continuing of a lesbian romance in a chaotic, alien world suggests that lesbian relationships are only achievable when removed from the ethos of the current, heterocentric social system.

Similarly, the stories set in ancient China are usually set in a time in which Chinese society was more strongly characterized by feudalism and patriarchy. The construction of lesbian romances in this kind of highly repressive context can be read as an ironic commentary on the marginalization of and discrimination against lesbians in the still-repressive present. Nevertheless, the historical plotlines in the fictions are always infused with some elements of cultural deviancy. This narrative maneuver implies that the existence of lesbianism is only possible in a deviant and/or disorderly social situation that contradicts current, mainstream, Chinese moral and social values.

In one fiction, *Shanghai 1943* (Bu Lai Mei De Fu Qiao 2007), the Y/S lesbian love is set in the context of the Chinese civil war period during which Chinese women were severely subordinated and had no control of their own destiny.[24] This lesbian romance happens between two characters working in a Chinese Moulin Rouge in which most of the girls are escorts. In another instance of historical fiction, *Peking Opera Blues* (San Shao Nai Nai De Shang Zi 2007), the lesbian romantic story is set in a female-only Chinese traditional opera troupe during the anti-Japan war era.[25] Almost all the females in this troupe are portrayed to be non-heterosexual. This plot

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[24] The Chinese title of this fiction is *Shang Hai Yi Jiu Si San*. The backdrop of the story is a time period before the founding of the People's Republic of China during which Chinese society was still at war.
[25] The Chinese title of this fiction is *Dao Ma Dan*. This kind of female troupe is frequently referred to as *Kun Ban*.

design is largely based on the cross-dressing tradition and transgenderism in this type

of Chinese female troupe. These cultural positionings of lesbianism in the historical

genre are manifestations of the fans' negotiation between queer subversions of the

repressive, patriarchal society and conformity to normative definitions of lesbianism.

On the one hand, the historical genre can be understood as a detour to

imagining nontraditional relationships between females that are unsettling to current,

patriarchal, and heterosexual hegemony. It has been argued that, in romance fiction,

historical settings are more often employed to "depict poverty, violence, and rape than

are romances set in the present. … [Because they] mak[e] the dramatization of such

perils more remote and therefore less threatening" (Seidel 1992, 166). Indeed, most of

these *FSCN* historical lesbian romances are accompanied with plots of rape, jealousy,

revenge, sexual licentiousness, suicide, and sexual violence and abuse toward and

between female characters. These dramatic, intense storylines and the permissive,

chaotic, distant settings greatly propel the homosocial and homoerotic bondings

between the subordinated females in the stories. As Maureen Quilligan (2005, 12-13)

has pointed out, lesbianism is a way for women to retain their agency, actively express

their desires, and refuse to be traded out in a patriarchal society. Through creating

dramatic lesbian fantasies in historical, patriarchal settings, the writers speak

discursively to the contemporary, repressive Chinese society. While a direct

subversion of heterocentrism in mainstream Chinese culture seems unrealistic and less

possible, these historical lesbian fantasies offer the fan readers a distant queer

resistance against the real-world, dominant cultural forces that deny, marginalize, and

silence women's same-sex desires.

On the other hand, although historical settings "have an advantage in creating fantasy worlds because our view of the past is selective" (Putney 1992, 99), selective historical Chinese contexts in these *Jia Kong* stories are not utopian queer fantasy worlds. The imagined lesbianism in the historical subgenre is not exempt from being defined by heterocentric hegemony. Similar to the Western plotlines, the historical settings are employed to present relatively "naturalized" lesbian romances developed through women's cross-gender identifications or emotional bonds in an authoritarian, patriarchal surrounding. In such cases, the fan writers attribute lesbian desires and relationships to the attachment of female friends in unconventional cultural environments. This means to "explain" lesbianism, to some extent, compromises with the heteronormative control over queer Chinese desires and identities that the fans try to overturn through slash writing.

In general, the lesbian romances in culturally distant settings often imply that contemporary, mainstream Chinese society offers no homosocial space for non-heterosexual people. The plots of most *Jia Kong* literature often suggest that those who want to have a lesbian relationship need to run away from the judgment of their peers, cut off their social ties with family members and friends, and live in either a culturally distant place or time in order to evade the pressures that could hinder the development of their non-mainstream love. This implication of the *Jia Kong* genre demonstrates the fan writers' deep frustration and constant negotiation with the normative and hegemonic repression and marginalization of lesbianism in the real

world, contemporary Chinese society. These conflicts between virtual queer desires, fictional lesbian fantasies, and off-line, normative culture eventually make *FSCN* slash fiction a complicated social and cultural construct.

Slash Narratives are not an Escape

Some academic literature contends that slash fans have a tendency to ignore real-world, queer-related, social and political issues and to focus only on the pleasure generated through their play with same-sex desires (e.g., Lothian 2008; McLelland 2000a). As Rhiannon Bury claims, "[t]he function of romance fiction, even if it is queer, is to provide an escape from unpleasant realities; simply put, issues detract from the fantastical pleasures of such texts" (2005, 93-94). However, as can be seen from my analysis of *FSCN* slash writing, online, fannish, romantic stories, while they do provide a site for the fans to express and experience fictional lesbian fantasies, are neither unconcerned with nor completely detached from the local, repressive realities. Instead, *FSCN* slash narratives are where the fans elaborate their queer desires, struggle with mainstream, heteronormative images, negotiate with normative, patriarchal culture, and discursively voice their recognition of the undesirable situations of non-heterosexual females in contemporary China. Thus, my findings about the contradictions embodied in slash fiction question the perception of slash fandom as a utopian, queer site that is freed of normative and hegemonic culture. In the next chapter, I use an analysis of the general slash fan discourse on *FSCN* to query the alleged queer, subversive potential of online slash activity to liberate fans from the oppressive reality of the off-line, mainstream world and to allow everyone to

"celebrate their difference" (Jones Paraphrasing Foucault 2009).

Chapter 3

Normativity and Queerness in *FSCN* Cultural Discourses

In addition to slash writing, the fans' queer readings of the show *SG* and queer

gossip about the *SG* contestants also flood *FSCN*. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the

media discourse around *SG* includes homosocial connotations about its contestants

that encourage the audience's queer fantasies. Since 2005, there have been large

numbers of fan communities engaged in a variety of online queer reading activities

devoted to some androgynous *SG* celebrities. According to Ling Yang's (2010)

observation, the first online *SG* slash forum *Chao Nv YY Wu Xian* was built in August

2005 by fans of the second runner-up of 2005 *SG*, Liangying Zhang.[26] Also, both the

winner and runner-up of 2005 *SG* have a great many slash fandoms online because of

their tomboyish style and ambiguous relationships with other contestants. In 2006,

online *SG* slash communities were further expanded by rampant lesbian rumors of a

staggeringly large number of the androgynous contestants. In comparison to the

off-line, heterocentric cultural context, virtual social spaces seem to afford a better

place for queer fans to explicitly express their desiring voices for these androgynous

celebrities' nontraditional gender and sexual identities. However, online *SG* slash

fandom is not a unilateral, uncontested cultural environment.

Although the online fandoms of some androgynous *SG* contestants have

become sites for fans to celebrate and emulate non-hegemonic gender and sexuality

(e.g., Yang 2010; Yang & Bao 2012; Yue & Yu 2008), there is some discord between

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[26] The Chinese title of this forum means "unlimited homoerotic imaginings of *Super Girl*." It is available at
http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%B3%AC%C5%AEYY%CE%DE%CF%DE

the contestants' online mainstream and slash fandoms. Some research points out that mainstream *SG* fan communities reject queer readings of *SG* (e.g., Yang 2010; Yang & Bao 2012). Yang (2010) has given two possible explanations for mainstream fans' reaction. According to her understanding, either mainstream fans' exclusive love for one particular *SG* celebrity or their distorted understandings of lesbianism can account for their rejection of the queer interpretations of the relationships between their idols and other *SG* contestants. In contrast, the *SG* slash fandom, *FSCN*, has been argued to be an inclusive, supportive cultural environment for homoerotic narratives and queer communities (Yang & Bao 2012, 8). These conceptualizations of online *SG* fan subculture not only simplify the intricate cultural discourses fans draw upon to voice their desires for unconventional gender and sexual performances but also ignore the dynamics of fans' cultural identities in cyberspace.

Firstly, it is misleading to believe that *SG* mainstream and slash fan communities are mutually exclusive. Both mainstream and slash sites are places for fans to express their support for the androgyny of *SG* celebrities, yet through dissimilar discourses. While fans in mainstream forums voice their love for the celebrities from normative cultural positions, fans in slash fandom fulfill their queer fantasies about the celebrities in non-mainstream, imaginative communities. Meanwhile, fans are able to move between mainstream and slash fandoms and act in accordance with the cultural conventions of the specific site they visit. Thus, it is possible for some fans to join in both mainstream and slash communities online.

Moreover, slash identities are not opposed to normative and hegemonic ways of

thinking. Rather, slash activity should be considered as a contestable cultural

discourse that is not necessarily exempt from the intertwined influences of the

repressive mainstream spaces and fans' own acculturation within normative culture.

As Fiske has pointed out, "[f]antasy should not be opposed conceptually to reality, as

though the two were mutually exclusive concepts" (1989, 124). Online slash

discourses, in this sense, embody both virtual fantasies and "a piece of reality"

(McRobbie 1984, 184). The struggle between fans' virtual queer desires within slash

fandom and their normative identities inscribed in the mainstream, real world is what

makes *SG* slash fandom a complex terrain of conflict and negotiation.

In this chapter, I analyze the complicated, fannish cultural discourses on *FSCN*.

My analysis addresses the tensions between the fans' own slash identities, queer

desires, and normative assumptions of lesbianism in cyberspace. I focus more on the

ways the fans manage to isolate their virtual queer fantasies from both online and

offline mainstream environments than on what exactly the fans queerly imagine and

gossip about. I also pay close attention to the fans' responses to nonfictional lesbian

topics, including the real-world lesbian scandals about some *SG* celebrities. By means

of this, I show that *FSCN* is an imaginative, self-contained place for voicing fictional

queer desires but not an empowering utopia that fully resists and subverts

heterosexual hegemony. In addition to the analysis of the negotiation between

normative and queer cultures within *FSCN*, I present some possible explanations for

the eventual retreat of *FSCN* fans from online queer readings after the collapse of the

boundary between their virtual queer fantasies and the nonfictional, real-world lesbian

activities of the *SG* celebrities.

My exploration of the fan discourses on *FSCN* ultimately reveals that this slash fandom remains a middle ground between normative notions of deviant lesbianism and queer fantasies about media characters. Its fans' normative cultural positions in terms of identities and sexualities in both online and off-line mainstream environments often project onto their virtual slash practices surrounding the *SG* celebrities and, as a result, constantly suspend and impede their queer challenging of mainstream culture.

Online *SG* Mainstream and Slash Fandoms

FSCN is a just one of numerous fan forums built on Baidu Post Bar (Baidu hereafter). As the most popular virtual communication site in mainland China, Baidu allows individual netizens to set up forums, create threads, share information, and communicate with each other. As of 2012, it has had more than 2,000,000 forums, most of which are fandoms of entertainment media and popular culture worldwide. Since 2005, both *SG* slash and mainstream fandoms have been set up on Baidu. The mainstream forums are named after individual *SG* celebrities and deemed as official sites for fans to share formal information about the celebrities. They are also filled with normative fan activities around the androgynous celebrities. Fans can post pictures showing the effeminate side of the celebrities, gossip about the romantic relationships between the *SG* celebrities and male stars, and share either fan-made or mainstream audiovisual materials featuring heterosexual romantic stories about the celebrities. Some fans also write heterosexual fan fiction and set up subforums to

circulate the fiction. Many *SG* celebrities often visit their mainstream fan forums on

Baidu, read fan entries, and communicate with their fans.

In comparison to its mainstream sites, *SG* slash forums on Baidu are more

diversified in terms of the objects of the fandoms. They can focus either on one

specific pairing or on one particular celebrity. For instance, the slash forum *Chun*

Shang is dedicated to the pairing of two *SG* celebrities, Yuchun Li and Wenjie Shang;

while the forum *Shang Gong Shang Shou* exclusively concentrates on the queer

activities about Shang.[27] Some slash forums are devoted to all the possible pairings in

one specific season of *SG*. *FSCN* is a good example of this kind of slash forum.

Different from the mainstream, heteronormative appreciations of the celebrities,

there are many threads devoted to queer gossip about and imaginings of the celebrities

in slash fandoms. In the slash threads, fans actively post the homoerotic pictures and

videos of the celebrities, and gather and queerly discuss large amounts of secondary

information through mainstream media, tabloids, and the celebrities' personal blogs.

Based upon their rich associations of information, fans look into trivial details to

intensify the official homosocial pairing of certain *SG* celebrities "performed" on the

show. For example, in a slash thread on *FSCN* devoted to one popular pairing of two

contestants, Fei Xu and Na Li, one fan posted a series of pictures in which the two

were attending a show sponsored by Pepsi and wearing same-style Pepsi T-shirts (Xue

Bu Neng Bu Fei 2008). In the following queer discussions of this thread, the fans

imagine the contestants' behind-the-scenes lesbian relationship by closely analyzing

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[27] *Chun Shang* forum is available at http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%B4%BA%C9%D0. *Shang Gong Shang Shou* forum is available at http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%C9%D0%B9%A5%C9%D0%CA%DC

their similar outfits, intimate gestures, and facial expressions. This kind of queer

reading activity is abundant in *SG* slash fandom.

Most Baidu forums are not access-controlled and allow visitors to read and

respond to others' posts without registering as Baidu formal users or logging in. This

feature greatly mobilizes *SG* fans. Many slash fans frequently go to mainstream sites

to look for information that is worth further queerly interpreting. It is also not

uncommon for mainstream fans to find online slash fandoms about their idols and

start to participate in online queer activity. Numerous fans on *FSCN* insist that they

are above all hardcore fans of some of the most popular androgynous *SG* celebrities.

Some *FSCN* fans call themselves members of "Snow Pear" (*Xue Li* in Chinese) which

is the name of the mainstream fan group of the *SG* celebrity Na Li. Others proclaim

that they are in Liyang Liu's mainstream fan community named "Chestnut" (*Li Zi* in

Chinese). Furthermore, there is a thread on *FSCN* comparing the size of Liu's and

Shang's mainstream fan groups that are active in this slash fandom.[28] This well

demonstrates that some slash fans simultaneously identify themselves as mainstream

fans of certain *SG* celebrities.

The great mobility of online *SG* fans sometimes also escalates the conflicts over

queer readings between heteronormative and queer fans within slash fandoms. Some

mainstream, heteronormative fans post anti-queer entries on *FSCN* to condemn queer

readings as personal affronts to the *SG* celebrities. In response to these posts, several

senior slash fans openly declare that they are not mainstream, "pure" fans (*Chun Fen*

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[28] The thread was created by Hua Li De 33 Luo Bo on September 25, 2006. It sis available at
http://tieba.baidu.com/p/135579815?pn=1

in Chinese) of any individual *SG* celebrities, and scorn mainstream fans and fandoms (e.g., FIRE1001 2007; A Xiu Luo Zhi Shu Hai 2007b). In a few extreme cases, some *SG* slash fandoms have been severely hacked by heteronormative fans or even forced to move to other communication platforms (Yang & Bao 2012, 6).

Online *SG* fandoms allow its fans to possess both mainstream and slash identities and play in diverse discourses on different types of fan sites. As Hanmer has claimed, "[v]irtual queer fandom assists individuals to resist the hold of the local, in respect of a queer virtual online identity" (Hanmer 2010, 148). The identity discourse in *SG* fandoms permits slash fans to switch their cultural positions between the off-line normative, the online mainstream, and the virtual queer. While mainstream forums resemble off-line, local, heterocentric society, slash sites help some *SG* fans partially evade the repression, restraints, and discrimination in both online and off-line mainstream spaces. To some extent, the plurality and performativity of *SG* fan identities confirm Alexander Doty's argument that "the queer often operates within the nonqueer, as the nonqueer does within the queer" (1993, xv). Yet, they further complicate the cultural discourses in which slash fans struggle with their normative stances and their queer desires.

Indeed, slash fans' online queer practices defy the normative readings of the *SG* celebrities. But, meanwhile, their hegemonic positions often confine their queer imaginations to virtual, imagined worlds, hinder the transformation of imaginative queer practices into both online and off-line subversive activities, and sometimes even replicate the off-line othering of real-world lesbianism within online slash fandoms. In

the following part of this chapter, my analysis of the fan discourses on *FSCN*

exemplifies that the fans' isolating of their queer fantasies within a virtual,

imaginative, exclusionary community is the result of the negotiation between their

queer desires and normative concerns about both real-life lesbianism and virtual

queerness.

Slash Identities of *FSCN* Fans

For online *SG* fans, posting information as registered Baidu formal users on a

fan forum is a means to support the theme/object of that fandom. Usually, the more

entries created by registered users the forum has, the more popular its theme/celebrity

is. All registered Baidu users are required to create their own online user names. They

are also allowed to create an unlimited number of different user names. Loyal *SG* fans

prefer to login with their user names before they share information and communicate

with others in the fandoms, as it is thought to be a way of showing respect to the

celebrities and other fans.

What makes *FSCN* particularly interesting is that most of its slash fans have

multiple pseudonyms. The names the fans create and use on *FSCN* usually imply their

great interests in queering *SG* contestants. For instance, the user name, "Vanquished

Y/S" (*Zheng Fu Yang Shang* in Chinese), refers to the pairing of Y/S and the song

Vanquished sung by Liyang Liu and Wenjie Shang during their competition in the

final round of *SG* in 2006. The user name, June F/X (*Liu Yue Fei Xue* in Chinese),

refers to the nicknames of the two characters in the pairing of Fei Xu and Na Li, and

the period of time in 2006 during which their homosocial bond was constructed and

presented on *SG*. These expressive pseudonyms of *FSCN* fans implicitly voice their

queer desires for and imaginations of certain *SG* pairings or contestants.

The fans refer to online user names as "waist coat(s)/clothes/skin(s)" (*Ma Jia*/*Yi*

Fu/*Pi* in Chinese) and call the act of switching pseudonyms when moving from one

site to another a "change of waist coats/clothes/skins" (*Huan Ma Jia* or *Tuo Yi Fu/Pi*

in Chinese). Many active fans on *FSCN* also often post information on other

mainstream forums of the *SG* celebrities. When participating in queer reading

activities on *FSCN*, the fans tend to hide their slash identities from other mainstream

fans by frequently switching between their mainstream and slash pseudonyms. Since

most of the fans create new user names and change their pseudonyms often, there

were even several "changing of waist coats" competitions held on *FSCN*. Sometimes,

a few fans forget to change back to their slash pseudonyms after visiting mainstream

sites. Then, their entries under some *FSCN* slash threads can be easily traced back

through their mainstream names. After their mainstream user names are discovered by

other *FSCN* fans, they beg others not to reveal their slash identities and pseudonyms

on mainstream sites and ask to delete their slash entries posted under mainstream

names.[29] A senior *FSCN* fan who discovered others' mainstream names also made fun

of these fans' "carelessness" by saying that, "You guys often forget to change clothes.

Now the evidence against you has fallen into my hands" (Shang Shu Fu Ge Ji 2007).

As some anonymous fans implied during discussion, the reason for them not to use

mainstream names on *FSCN* is because they dread the fans on mainstream sites

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[29] For more details, see http://tieba.baidu.com/p/166973394?pn=193.

finding out about their participation in queer practices (e.g., Anonymous 2007).

As Penley argues, "fans use pseudonyms not just for the joyful and imaginative expression of alternative and shifting identities. They also have something to hide" (1992, 494). Jung also feels that "many fans use pseudonyms, aware of the fact that their 'hobby' may not stand well with friends, family or employers" (2004). In this vein, the shifting of online pseudonyms and hiding of slash identities within *FSCN* help build an online "closet" for these slash fans. The refusal to come out of this online slash closet reveals that, while the fans celebrate their productive queer activities on *FSCN*, they are aware that their queer fantasies stay deviant and unacceptable to the majority of people in online, mainstream, social environments. By using and frequently changing pseudonyms, the fans manage to play their normative roles and keep their "abnormal" queer activities unknown to "normal" fans on mainstream sites.

The fans' inclination to sustain their normative identities in mainstream spaces is also shown in the ways they perceive their own slash activity. Some *FSCN* fans advise other slash fans not to post queer discussions about *SG* contestants on mainstream sites, as they believe that this act will get slash fans into a lot of trouble (e.g., Pi Pi Xiao Luo Bo 2009; Liao Liao Ai Yang Shang 2006). Also, when *FSCN* fans post pictures and information borrowed from mainstream sites, they refer to their acts as "stealing" (*Tou* in Chinese). This word discloses the fans' association of queer activities with underground, illegal practices that should be kept in secret. When queering the canonical materials drawn from mainstream media, the fans often use the

word "convulse" (*Chou* in Chinese) to link their queer readings with a kind of

abnormal, insane behavior. As demonstrated by these examples, the fans show a

self-awareness of the controversial aspect of queering Chinese popular culture.

Queer desires, although no longer officially pathologized or criminalized in

contemporary China, are still deemed as unjustified lust or psychological perversion

in heteronormative, Chinese popular culture (Engebretsen 2008; Yang 2010). Even if

fans have already confined their queer fantasies in a virtual, non-mainstream

community, they still have an underlying discomfort with their queer practices and are

afraid of being censured by online normative culture. Consequently, they separate and

hide their slash identities from their normative relations in mainstream fandoms. In so

doing, the fans are able to satisfy their queer desires and protect their non-mainstream,

imaginative space while still performing in conformity with dominant ideologies that

ostracize queer cultures in both online and off-line, mainstream, social environments.

Certainly, it would be essentializing to assume that all the fans on *FSCN* tend to

sustain normative identities in either online or off-line spaces. Since *FSCN* is a

femslash fandom fundamentally emphasizing the lesbian potential and romances of

the *SG* celebrities, some fans on the site might be self-identified queers who have

openly acknowledged their non-mainstream sexual preferences and/or cultural

interests. These fans themselves may not try to deny their slash identities or feel

uncomfortable with queering popular culture and celebrities. Yet, the slash activities

within *FSCN* often exclude nonfictional lesbian topics and voices of self-identified

queer fans. This characteristic of *FSCN* further unmasks some of its fans' compliance

with the hegemonic ideology that problematizes real-life lesbianism. This

compromising posture of some *FSCN* fans compels them to culturally "normalize"

their fictional, queer practices by rejecting nonfictional lesbianism within this online,

non-mainstream, social space.

***FSCN* is not about "Lesbian"**

     FSCN often openly others nonfictional lesbian topics and silences

lesbian-identified fans. The administrators of *FSCN* frequently delete threads

discussing the sexual orientations of the fans and investigating the number of

self-identified butch and femme lesbians among the fans on the site. One of the main

administrators of this forum, A Xiu Luo Zhi Shu Hai (AXLZSH hereafter), in

response to some fan discussions involving feminist and lesbian topics on *FSCN*,

declared that "*FSCN* is neither a center for feminists nor a rallying point for lesbians"

(2007c). Similarly, in a thread for announcing the records of banned user names and

deleted, undesirable posts on *FSCN*, one fan also asserted that, "[some lesbian-themed]

posts should be deleted, because [*FSCN*] is not a lesbian forum. Lesbian topics are not

compatible with the content and nature of *FSCN* forum" (YS Bang Ming Bu Zhi Zhui

Ming 2006). In addition, some *FSCN* fans often stress that "exclusive pairings" (*Wang

Dao* in Chinese) of the *SG* celebrities are about neither homosexuality not perversion

(e.g., Jian Dan De Li Zi 2006; Liu Xu Piao Piao Fei Wu 2007). In a statement about

"random discussions" on *FSCN* (*Guan Shui* in Chinese), AXLZSH explained the

reason for annihilating nonfictional lesbian topics on the forum in this way: "*FSCN* is

a gathering point for female GL fans (*Tong Ren Nv* in Chinese), [and] female GL fans

are not homosexuals" (2006).

What makes this kind of anti-lesbianism yet pro-GL statement on *FSCN* more intriguing is a popular thread about lesbian media worldwide. In May 2007, AXLZSH created a thread titled "Beauty Comes in Twos——A Building of GL Pictures" (Mei Ren Cheng Shuang——GL Tu Lou in Chinese).[30] In the thread, AXLZSH posted hundreds of homoerotic images drawn from Chinese lesbian movies, Japanese girls' love (GL hereafter) comics, American lesbian TV shows, Asian advertisements with lesbian connotations, and candid photos of real-life lesbians. As of July 2012, this thread has more than 2,070 following entries. In the annotations of the pictures, AXLZSH stated that, "these kinds of pictures have nothing to do with lesbian-themed topics" (2007a). Throughout the thread, AXLZSH kept emphasizing that all of these homoerotic media, including the American lesbian TV show *The L Word*, are GL but not about lesbianism. This awkward categorizing of fictional, lesbian media as non-lesbianism can be explained by a commonly-shared knowledge in Chinese GL fan culture. GL is usually thought to be imagined, fictional romantic/sexual relationships between females, while "lesbian/lesbianism" are terms referring to real-world, nonfictional lesbian identities, desires, and relationships (letusgo 2011). Although some of the images clearly present real-life lesbians, AXLZSH denies this fact and strives to create a difference between the lesbian media images fantasized about by the fans and nonfictional lesbianism. In this way, she further promotes this slash fandom as a fantasy place where fans can appreciate and appropriate

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[30] It is available at http://tieba.baidu.com/p/198230695?pn=1

homosocial/homoerotic images and texts from a queer angle but not a virtual utopia for fans of non-heterosexual orientations to communicate about nonfictional lesbian desires.

These online fan statements in general show an explicit exclusion of and intolerance toward real-world lesbianism within *FSCN*. By emphasizing the fictional, imaginative nature of their online slash activity, the fans attempt to distinguish slash identities from real-life lesbian identities. This attempt actually reflects some *FSCN* fans' frustration with their own virtual queer practices and desires that are defined as deviant by mainstream culture. The prioritizing of the fans' slash activities over the practices of self-identified lesbians on *FSCN*, although aimed at validating the status of slash culture, eventually produces a cultural hierarchy within this fandom. Alexis Lothian opines that slash fans often make their queer social space "end up exclusionary, revolutionizing the lives of only a chosen few" (2008). Yet, the cultural discrimination of *FSCN* makes this slash fandom not only exclusionary but also normative to certain queer fans.

In his study of a Hong Kong femslash fandom, Cheuk Yin Li (2012) finds out that some homophobic fans participate in online slash fandom to look for evidence to empower their own anti-queer identities. Nonetheless, the exclusion of real-world lesbian topics made by AXLZSH and some other fans on *FSCN* does not simply represent a straightforward disdain for lesbianism. Rather, the ways these fans play at virtual queerness show that *FSCN* is a more convoluted field of contestations and negotiations with respect to desires and sexualities. These fan performances unveil an

ideological struggle between the fans' queer desires repressed by online and off-line

mainstream cultures and their normative views of real-life lesbianism. The fans'

divorcing of their queer fantasies from nonfictional lesbian themes is a representation

of their eagerness for gaining legitimacy in mainstream society and obtaining a more

"justified" cultural position within slash fandom. By showing a disinterest in

nonfictional lesbianism, the fans successfully participate in slash practices without

overstepping the boundary between the constructed, media world and heteronormative

reality. This paradoxical aspiration for both fulfilling queer fantasies and maintaining

normative identities in the real world is also illustrated by *FSCN* fans' queer readings

of the celebrities.

Queer Readings of the *SG* Celebrities

Similar to the pairings in slash writing in this fandom, the fans' queer readings

are also limited to the "pre-existing" homosocial pairings of the celebrities that have

been presented on the show. One distinctive characteristic of the queer reading

activities on *FSCN* is that most fans are more than happy to see queer gossip about

and imaginings of lesbian romances between the *SG* contestants. For example, one of

the most popular slash threads on *FSCN* is devoted to the pairing of F/X.[31] This thread

was started by AXLZSH in May 2006. It is flooded with screen captures of *SG*, news

coverage about Fei Xu and Na Li from mainstream media, and the fans' own queer

gossip about these two contestants' close friendship. As of July 2012, it had more than

26,500 posts. There also are many slash threads on *FSCN* exclusively devoted to a

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[31] This thread is available at http://tieba.baidu.com/p/102535402?pn=1.

single *SG* contestant. In these kinds of threads, the fans focus on queer imaginings of the homoerotic relationships between this particular celebrity and multiple other *SG* contestants.

When exploring real person slash writings and discussions in Western fandom, Kristina Busse discovers that "for most fans, celebrities are simultaneously real and fictional, and . . . fans can talk about their fantasies as if they were real while being aware that this 'reality' merely constitutes a fandomwide conceit" (2006, 209). According to Busse (2006, 214), it is not uncommon for both fan writers and slash fans in general to maintain that their queer imaginations are only constructed and should be distinguished from rumors. These findings are well exemplified by the fans' queer reading practices on *FSCN*. Although slashing the celebrities allows the fans to enthusiastically engage in activities that fulfill their queer desires, a large number of *FSCN* fans are reluctant or even resistant to discussing the true sexual orientations of these public figures. Once the queer fantasies about certain *SG* celebrities blur the line between the fictional, media world and reality, the fans start to question the legitimacy of their queer reading practices.

A great many fans in this forum exhort others to be aware of the distinction between reality and what they queerly imagine. Fei Xue Bao Zi, a senior slash fan on *FSCN* who started one of the most influential threads devoted to Liyang Liu, once urged other followers in this thread not to take exclusive pairings between certain *SG* contestants too seriously. In her response to other slash fans' passionate engagement in queer discussions, Fei Xue Bao Zi used Chinese words like "*YY*" (queerly imagine)

and "*Xi*" (plays) to draw a clear distinction between reality and the fans' unrealistic

queer fantasies about Liu and her potential homoerotic relationships with other

androgynous *SG* contestants. As she stated, "any exclusive pairings are only the fans'

queer wishful thinking. We should use them to entertain ourselves, but try not to get

deeply involved in these fictional plays" (Fei Xue Bao Zi 2006).

Another case in point is the afterword of *FSS*. After finishing the major part of

the novel, the author CO521 wrote a short postscript to the avid fans of this story:

> Liu and Shang in *FSS* are not Liu and Shang in my mind . . .
>
> The so-called slash only means two persons, somebody and
> somebody, performing a couple in a play. When the shows are over,
> they continue to go about their own lives.
>
> The so-called exclusive pairing does not mean that anything
> romantic really happened between these two persons, but you are
> inclined to believe that they once had something special. That is all.
> (CO521 2007).

This statement distances the widely-influential, fictional, lesbian, romantic story from

the personal lives of these two celebrities in the off-line, real world. Furthermore, it

confirms slash fans' intention to use online queer activity as a playground of

unrealistic, fictional, queer imagination, one that should not be confused with reality.

FSCN fans refuse to merge the *SG* celebrities' real-life sexualities into their

fictional slash writing and queer reading practices. Even though these celebrities have

become well-known for their androgynous personas, they remain constructed

characters who can only legitimately play lesbian roles in the fans' imagined worlds.

As Penley says, what slash fans explore is "an erotic homosexual subtext [embedded

in the primary text] … that could easily be made to be there" (1991, 137). Yet, this

characteristic of *FSCN* fan activity can also be read as a result of the fans' inner

conflict over their queer desires. In conformity with the heterosexual hegemony of

mainstream social and cultural environments, the fans restrict their queer imaginations

to what the media text already implies and keep the voicing of their "abnormal"

fantasies within this imaginative community. The fans see this detour to queer desires

as more legitimate than real-life lesbianism. Once real-world, lesbian-related issues

intrude in the fannish world, the border between the virtual, imaginative space, where

all impossible things can happen, and the physical world, which is run by

heterocentric ideologies, is traversed. In order to guard heterosexual hegemony in the

mainstream world, the fans retreat and rebuild the boundary between reality and

online queer imaginations by eliminating nonfictional lesbian rumors within this slash

fandom.

Jung has noted that one controversial contention of some Western slash fans,

that the queering of a media figure is offensive to the actor/actress playing the role in

mainstream media, is essentially a "homosexual panic" imposed by mainstream

culture (2004). In this sense, the tendency to dodge the discussions about the real

sexual preferences of the *SG* celebrities on *FSCN* can be argued to be an instance of

lesbian panic. For example, in the most influential slash thread devoted to the pairing

of F/X, the posts directly referring to the contestants' lesbian identities are usually

thought to be from their detractors, and are quickly removed from the forum by

administrators or ignored by the majority of the fans. At one point, several fans

interjected and posted some information and pictures disclosing the real lesbian

identities of Fei Xu and Na Li (e.g., FIRE1001 2006; Ren Jian FISH 2006). In

response to the posts, only a few fans showed interest in discussing whether Xu and

Li are lesbians in reality (e.g., flysnowforever 2006). However, this nonfictional,

lesbian gossip was constantly interrupted by comments like "Do not mix your queer

imagination with reality," (e.g., Fei Xue Ji Di 2006b) or "Do not involve the private

lives of these contestants in this. Only mind our own queer fantasies" (e.g., Fei Xue Ji

Di 2006a).

　　FSCN fans' ultimate lesbian panic can be better illustrated by their queer

readings of Liyang Liu. In the thread titled, "A Building of Pictures of Guangzhou

Fellow Student Liu" (*Guangzhou Liu Tong Xue Tu Lou* in Chinese), the fans actively

post pictures of Liu, eulogize Liu's androgynous persona, and queerly read the

homosocial bonds between Liu and other *SG* contestants.[32] This thread was created in

July 2006. As of May 2012, it has had nearly 900,000 hits and more than 22,000

entries. Unlike the fictional promotion of Liu's butch lesbian identity in slash writing,

few posts in the thread directly point to Liu's potential lesbian identity in real life.

During the queer reading of Liu in this thread, the fans devote most of their attention

to appreciating how "dreamy" and "princely" her outward appearance is (e.g., Fu Huo

YY 2006). Most of the fan expressions avoid connecting her real-life, tomboyish look

with a butch identity by elevating her off-screen androgyny to a kind of fashionable

style. They frequently use expressions associated with traditional females, such as

"pretty," "beautiful," "innocent," "graceful," and "elegant," to praise her outward

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[32] The title of this thread refers to the city of *SG* preliminary round which Liu was in, Guangzhou. It was created by Fei Xue Bao Zi on August 13, 2006. It is available at http://tieba.baidu.com/p/113685568

appearance.

In such threads, the word "handsome" (*Shuai* in Chinese) is also frequently applied to Liu. As Li (2012) found out, the use of "handsome" to describe female celebrities is attacked by some Hong Kong fans, as it has a butch-identity implication. But, in both *SG* mainstream and slash fandoms, this word is quite commonly used in an identity discourse of "neutrosexuality" (*Zhong Xing* in Chinese). Neutrosexual/Neutrosexuality are newly-emergent, popular Chinese words "referring to transgression of hegemonic gender scripts in fashion and style" (2011, 4). Chinese fans often use "neutrosexual" to "beautify and camouflage the stigmatized identity of butch lesbian. [Because n]eutraosexual is now a safer and less socially sanctioned word" (Li 2011, 5).

The fashioning of Chinese neutrosexual identities in recent years can be better explained by the fans' or even many Chinese females' conflicting feelings about female androgyny. In a traditional patriarchal society like China, androgynous females who defy conventional feminine traits, transgress a heteronormative gender binary, and threaten the hegemonic position of males are not only stigmatized but also linked to gender identity disorders. Many netizens, especially self-claimed heterosexual males, who dislike this high-profile female androgyny on TV, call these female celebrities "brother" (*Ge* in Chinese).[33] This appellation usually aims to insult and implies that these females are transsexuals and/or prefer to cross-dress as males. Analogous to modern Western societies in which transsexuality and transvestism are

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[33] One case in point is the 2005 *SG* winner, Yuchun Li, who has been named "*Chun Ge*" by many Chinese netizens.

frequently positioned as "the most despised sexual castes" (Rubin 1984, 151),

mainstream Chinese society severely demonizes and pathologizes these sexual

"deviancies." Chinese females who are androgynous and/or supportive of androgyny

use the concept of neutrosexuality to detach female androgyny from the more

problematic connotations of female transsexualism.

   SG fans often praise these "neutrosexual" celebrities for their "both beautiful

and handsome" looks (*You Shuai You Mei* in Chinese). In so doing, fans categorize the

androgyny of the *SG* celebrities as a type of "female masculinity" that embodies both

desirable masculine and feminine traits (Engebretsen 2009, 6; Halberstam 1998, 5-9;

Yue & Yu 2008, 123). This way to frame the nontraditional gender and sexual

performances of the *SG* celebrities promotes their androgyny as a faddish gender ideal

without explicitly linking it to lesbian or transsexual identities. In Liu's thread on

FSCN, the fans continue this mainstream tradition to frequently describe Liu as

"neutrosexual" and "handsome." Nevertheless, these words have no obvious lesbian

connotations, but are discursive expressions to normalize and advocate her

androgynous performance while dodging the stigmatization and persecution

associated with non-heterosexuality.

   The tendency to shy away from the discussions about Liu's sexual orientation

was highlighted in this slash fandom when Liu was involved in a lesbian scandal that

was largely downplayed by the fans. In July 2010, to exert revenge on Liu after an

ugly breakup, Liu's ex-girlfriend spoke out about their lesbian relationship, posting

their text messages, pictures, and chat records in a blog.[34] Right after this scandal

erupted, the queer readings of and slash writings about Liu and Shang on *FSCN*,

which had been ongoing for more than four years, suddenly died down. And updates

to the most viewed thread for Liu subsequently stopped.[35] Although not a single fan

straightforwardly discussed this scandal in Liu's thread, a few posts revealed the fans'

disappointment with Liu. In a comment, one anonymous fan implicitly expressed her

frustration with this scandal: "I always try to forget her (Liu), as she is not the one

supposedly appearing in my world" (Anonymous 2010a). Later, another anonymous

fan referred to the invalidation of many previously-posted pictures of Liu in this

thread as "bubbles vanishing into thin air" (Anonymous 2010b). Several fans also

discursively expressed that they still believe that Liu is a good person and wish that

Liu can find a decent lover eventually (e.g., Fu Huo YY 2010; Wang Dao Zai Na

2010). As these expressions illustrate, some slash fans have been well aware of Liu's

off-screen lesbian identity. Yet, the fans' self-silencing of their queer readings of Liu

in the face of evidence of her real sexuality provide the ultimate rejection of

real-world lesbianism within *FSCN*.

It is hard to determine why exactly the fans abandoned their queer activities

about Liu. Several socio-cultural factors, though, might either directly or discursively

contribute to this phenomenon. As shown in the above analysis, many senior and

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[34] The article was originally titled "Those Things between Liyang Liu and Me (*Wo He Liu Liyang De Na Xie Shi Er* in Chinese)." This article and the pictures posted in the blog were deleted later by the author because of social pressure. Yet, this lesbian scandal had been reported and reprinted by many online and mainstream media outlets.

[35] The queer reading activities in Liu's most popular thread stopped for more than one year and four months after the outbreak of the lesbian scandal. As of December 2011, the thread had been continued by several fans. However, this thread has been altered to a place for posting Liu's pictures. Queer-natured discussions around Liu have become unpopular and rare in the thread since then.

leading fans on *FSCN* are supportive of queer readings of fictional lesbian media.

Meanwhile, they consciously discourage nonfictional lesbian communication and

dis-identify with real-life non-heterosexuals within this slash fandom. As José Esteban

Muñoz (1999) has argued, "[d]isidentification is meant to be descriptive of the

survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic

majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of

subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship." Since many

of these *FSCN* fans are involved in both slash activity and mainstream fan

communities, they can be seen as cultural queers who strive to survive in online,

normative, public spaces. While dis-identifying with non-heterosexual identities,

these fans simultaneously emphasize their identification with a less disruptive cultural

identity——online fans of fictional "non-lesbian GL" media. This process serves as

an ultimate negotiation of these slash fans to justify their imaginative, queer

playground and dodge the persecution of normative culture.

On the other hand, fans who are real-life sexual minorities and/or more

open-minded about plural and fluid sexualities in reality might either be excluded

from the fandom or offended by the discriminatory and normative aspects of *FSCN*.

In turn, they may choose to only consume queer productions on *FSCN* without

actively participating in queer reading practices. This internal power structure of

FSCN might eventually lead the fandom to become an exclusionary, expressive place

for those who have been in self-denial of their cultural queer identities or internalized

a negative attitude toward real-world non-heterosexuality. Correspondingly, after the

unexpected revelation of Liu's sexuality, most of the *FSCN* fans who used to be active in slashing Liu might have found it disturbing to continue fantasizing about and identifying with real lesbians. As a result, they discarded this imaginative community.

Also, the silence of this slash forum can be an extreme strategy for the "virtually-closeted" queer fans to seek escape from heteronormative reality. Queerness is always classified as *deviance* in the off-line, mainstream Chinese world (Engebretsen 2009, 5-6) and equated with *obscenity* in mainstream, Chinese Internet culture (Sohu 2009). Thus, the fans' virtual performances on *FSCN* are inextricably connected with their deep-seated concerns about their own queer identities in online and/or off-line mainstream spaces. On the one hand, in order to loosen the restraints of mainstream culture, the fans realize their queer fantasies in a private, self-contained, online community. On the other hand, since "virtual environment can suggest no identities are authentic" (Hanmer 2010, 149), they can keep their off-line, real-world, normative identities intact. Nonetheless, even if playing at queerness only within cyberspace, the fans remain reticent about their queer desires in online mainstream environments. This way of achieving queer readings of popular culture renders online slash activity "a highly personal exploration of desires" (Busse 2006, 211). It also confirms a general preference of Chinese queers for "invisibility and unspeakability" (Liu & Ding 2005, 48) in order to save face and sustain normative connections in the traditional Chinese world (Engebretsen 2008, 103-104). *FSCN*, therefore, serves as a battlefield between these fans' virtual queer desires and real-world normative positions.

Pop stars are constructed images that offer fans points of identification (Dyer 1998; Stacey 1991; Rojek 2001; Turner 2004). As elaborated by Turner, fans' cultural consumption of celebrity is "a continual play between identification and 'dis-identification.' Discovering, imagining and discarding identities is something that can be accomplished precisely without penalty [in this process]" (2004, 102). Slash activities, in particular, are ways for fans to "control and manipulate these identifications" (Busse 2006, 216). In this sense, the fictional queer discourses on *FSCN* are where the fans are able to deal with issues of their own non-mainstream desires and identities. Once the celebrities' real-life sexuality and the fans' conceived fantasies overlap, the equilibrium between the fans' virtual queerness and real-world normative identities is broken. Once the objects of their identifications become real lesbians, their fannish, private, personal, virtual desires are simultaneously extended to reality and become real. Under this circumstance, the fans are forced to come out of this virtual closet and to face the heterosexual hegemony of the physical world. In order to avoid confronting their own queerness, the fans eventually choose to quit their queer fantasies in this online fandom.

Some research has argued that online slash fans tend to keep their queer discussions about the non-heterosexuality of celebrities low profile, as this kind of topic is taboo in mainstream, public spaces and often infringes on celebrities' privacy (Busse 2006, 216; Li 2012). In this light, it is likely that some slash fans stopped their online queer readings to protect the celebrities they adore from the potential social pressures and discriminations caused by lesbian rumors like these.

Although, in the last two decades, there have been waves of political and social appeals for elevating the status of non-heterosexuals in China (Engebretsen 2009, 3-4), mainstream Chinese society is "hardly congenial territory for sexual minorities" (Gross 2003, 267). As addressed by Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen who researches Chinese lesbian communities, "[t]he dominant [public] attitude is one of prevailing stigma and negative stereotypes that attach homosexuality firmly to medical and moral deviance, or even crime. Discrimination and ignorance about homosexuality is considerable [in current Chinese society]" (2009, 4). As a conservative, patriarchal nation, mainstream Chinese society appears to be more hostile to non-heterosexual females than to non-heterosexual males. According to the observation of one *New York Times* reporter who has spent more than 5 years in one of the most open cities in mainland China, Shanghai, "the public emergence of gay men [became] an increasing evident fact of daily life…. though, open same-sex relationships among females here lagged far behind" (French 2010). Even for those Chinese lesbians who have no intention of hiding their sexuality, "open queer rights activism or direct 'coming out' rarely happen … [and is thought] to be undesirable, meaningless and morally bad: selfish, pointless, unfair [towards parents]" (Engebretsen 2008, 97).

Within such a cultural environment, it would be a better choice for young, female Chinese pop stars to let the lesbian controversy automatically die down than to directly respond to the scandals. Since it is not difficult for anti-lesbian netizens to find out about *FSCN* and connect its slash productions with the celebrities' real-life sexuality, the fans' celebration of queer readings after the eruption of the celebrities'

lesbian rumors might further position the lesbian celebrities in the center of the

controversy. Therefore, some *FSCN* fans' self-discipline might be attempts at

protecting the celebrities' privacy and avoiding the exacerbation of the public disputes

over their idols' real-life sexualities.

Whatever the reasons for it, the fans' sudden silencing of their own queer,

desiring voices on *FSCN* indicates that, even in online slash fandom, fans need to

constantly negotiate with hegemonic ideology that regards lesbianism in the off-line,

Chinese world as dishonorable, disturbing, or even monstrous. The fans' eventual

backing out of their slash writings and queer readings of the Chinese celebrities after

learning that they are likely lesbians in the real world reveals that they ultimately

choose to give up their virtual, queer fantasy wonderland under pressure from

mainstream Chinese culture.

Heterotopia and the *FSCN* Forum

Foucault's term, "heterotopia" (1986), is frequently borrowed by fan scholars to

describe the liberating and empowering potential of online slash fandom (e.g., Bury

2005; Li 2012). According to Foucault, heterotopias "are something like counter-sites,

a kind of effectively enacted utopias in which the real sites … are simultaneously

represented, contested, and inverted" (1986, 24). Following Foucault's definition,

Rhiannon Bury believes that heterotopias should be understood "in terms of resistance,

inversion, subversion or perhaps simply a space in which active consent to normative

practices is suspended" (2005, 17). Echoing this conceptualization of heterotopias as

anti-normative sites, Jones further elaborates that

> [Q]ueer heterotopias are sites of empowerment. … Queer
> heterotopias exist in opposition to heteronormative spaces and are
> spaces where individuals seek to disrupt heterosexist discourses
> [and] … where individuals attempt to dislocate the normative
> configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily
> exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity
> (Jones 2009).

According to these studies, online slash fandom functions as a special kind of queer

heterotopia that is politically subversive, anti-heteonormative, and counter-hegemonic.

However, fans' virtual queer desires are still "situated in a historically and culturally

inscribed space [informed by the] multiple directions of cultural influence" (Wekker

2006, 225). Meanwhile, "[social] space is a [social] product" (Lefebvre 1992, 26).

Thus, online social sites for playing out queer fantasies cannot guarantee an

indigenously queer place that is exempt from the permeation of normative culture. As

we have seen in the case of *FSCN*, there are multilayered contestations between slash

fans' queer desires, online and off-line mainstream cultures, and the fans' own,

internalized, normative ideas about virtual queerness and real-world lesbianism.

Muñoz notes that minorities' appropriation of mainstream media

representations aims to "disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build

an alternative reality" (1999, 196). In this vein, *FSCN* does provide a playground for

realizing queer fans' constructed, alternate imaginings of media characters. Dissimilar

to the outright rejection of fictional queer fantasies within mainstream fandoms, the

FSCN forum offers a certain degree of freedom and leaves more space for *SG* fans to

empower themselves through a diversity of explicit, queer activities. It is queer in the

sense that it allows slash fans to respond to Chinese popular culture from an angle

disruptive to their off-line identities and sexualities defined and confined by

normative culture. With little doubt, the fan activities in the forum help increase

lesbian representations and voice queer fantasies in the virtual world. Therefore, I do

not question the empowering potential of its slash activities.

However, the alternate scenarios created by the fans on this forum always

remain fictional and provisional. As elucidated by Li, "queer is always a dynamic,

contradictory, and imperfect notion to challenge normative categorization of identities

and subjectivities" (2012). My investigation highlights the imperfect aspect of the

queer discourses on *FSCN*. The fans' slash practices within this fandom are often

complicated, distorted, and interrupted by the inevitable infiltration of normative and

hegemonic assumptions of identities and sexualities. Without truly liberating all kinds

of gender, sexual, and cultural minorities, *FSCN* only has a limited effect in realizing

gender and sexuality boundary transgression and amplifying certain kinds of fictional,

queer voices and desires. In consequence, it would be problematic to name it a queer

heterotopia. Drawing support from my case study of the *FSCN* forum, I argue that the

emancipating potential of online slash fandom should be neither overlooked nor

overstated.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Along with the accelerated flow of online information, a large amount of academic research has accentuated the great potential of virtual imaginative spaces to resist local repressions, to raise the political stakes of marginalized groups, and to facilitate non-mainstream communication between disadvantaged individuals. Yet, the supposedly empowering and liberating functions of online communication, especially within conservative, mainstream social and cultural environments, need to be further examined. Far from a simple matter of resistance and subversion to mainstream society, online non-mainstream activity is emblematic of the struggles, conflicts, and negotiations between dominant and subordinate cultures.

Unlike many previous studies that hold an optimistic view of virtual social spaces as utopias for gender, sexual, and cultural minorities repressed by heterocentric societies, my project has provided an analysis of online slash fandom as a contestable cultural arena. Using *FSCN* as an example, I have focused specifically on Chinese queer fans' struggles over their queer desires and attitudes toward queerness in mainstream culture. Certainly, online slash activity in which audiences provide queer responses to mainstream popular culture transgresses some normative and hegemonic assumptions of gender and sexuality. Such fans employ revolutionary strategies to interpret popular culture, such as queer readings, "going far beyond the familiar terrain of gossip to claim a much wider cultural territory for oppositional and resistant readings" (Gross 2001, 153), and "wearing girlslash goggles" which "enable you to

see lesbian desire where it might otherwise be invisible…" (Russo 2007). Yet, in many ways, mainstream media images, dominant cultural conventions, online and off-line social experiences, and hegemonic ideologies deeply-rooted in society often shape, complicate, and thwart slash fans' virtual queer interpretations and imaginations. As argued through my examinations of *FSCN* slash narratives and queer reading practices, online slash culture is neither a straightforward challenge to Chinese heterocentric, patriarchal hegemonies, nor a completely escapist fantasy separated from the fans' acculturation within and concerns with their local, repressive realities. *FSCN* fans have conflicting feelings about their queer fantasies and slash activity, hide their slash identities, normalize the fictional lesbianism in their queer imaginations, and elevate the status of slash culture or protect their own or their idols' real-world, normative identities. This can result in the silencing of nonfictional lesbian topics within this online, imaginative, fannish space. For these reasons, online slash fandom does not necessarily promise a queer heterotopia. Rather, my research suggests that slash fandom should be considered and studied as a complex, cultural terrain of negotiations and contestations.

Admittedly, my project is limited in scope and left some questions for further research to explore. One possible direction would be the representations of gender and sexuality in other similar-style Chinese reality/idol TV shows and their online fandoms. For instance, the singing contest, *My Hero* (*Jia You! Hao Nan Er* in Chinese), is a *SG*-style show held by Shanghai-based Dragon TV. It exclusively allows male contestants and features many androgynous, beautiful, young male

participants. During its broadcast, there were many gay rumors about its contestants. Further research may look at the queer potential of this show and the dynamics of its online fan cultures. The questions of whether and how the queer aspect of the show is highlighted by the show's producers and articulated by its fans need to be answered.

Similarly, another reality TV show presented by HNTV, *Happy Boy* (*Kuai Le Nan Sheng* in Chinese) is the male counterpart of *SG*. Many famous *SG* slash writers on *FSCN*, such as CO521, are rumored to be active slash fans of this show and write slash fiction about *Happy Boy* contestants in its online slash fandoms as well. Thus, a comparative study of *SG* and *Happy Boy* slash literature could be fruitful further research. One possible focus of that research might be the ways these slash writers frame homoerotic relationships in both slash fandoms. Another valuable focus of this kind of research could be an exploration of the similarities and differences between Chinese femslash and male/male slash cultures. Also, one might continue to explore the negotiation between queer and mainstream cultures I have documented in *SG* slash fandom within *Happy Boy* fandoms.

My study has not fully explored the question of why androgynous celebrities become extremely successful and well-liked in today's Chinese popular culture. To better answer this question, scholars concentrating on Chinese queer culture might need to consider the historical, political, social, and cultural shaping of younger generations of Chinese audiences across identity categories rather than looking exclusively at gender and sexual minorities.

Furthermore, additional research might compare mainstream and slash fandoms

devoted to the same celebrities. There have been many conflicts between online

mainstream and slash fans of some of the most popular androgynous *SG* celebrities,

such as Yuchun Li or Wenjie Shang. Yet, according to my observation, many

mainstream fans are well-aware of the lesbian identities or potential of their idols and

they only pretend to go against queer readings of these celebrities when participating

in mainstream social environments. Nevertheless, this type of research would require

a more detailed analysis of mainstream culture on the *SG* celebrities' official fan sites

than what I have presented in Chapter 3. I suggest that further studies follow this

direction to investigate the confusing, controversial virtual personas and identities of

SG fans and their performativity within mainstream cultural environments.

Furthermore, since my study has only employed discourse analysis, the more

specific demographics of and the direct cultural responses from *SG* fan groups are

hard to specify in the project. Also, as *FSCN* is the only online slash fan site being

analyzed in this research, some of my findings might be limited to this specific

fandom. More research needs to be done to test the efficacy and applicability of my

study. Hence, to further research focusing on the same or similar topics, I recommend

using multi-sited ethnography. By the definition of anthropologist George E. Marcus,

"multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or

juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal,

physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among

sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (1995, 105). The reason for

utilizing this research method to examine online fandom can be explained by Paula

Saukko's words. As she claims, "multi-sited research … locates a social phenomenon within a wider social and, possible global, context, pointing at connections that exist between what one is studying and other social processes or locations" (Saukko 2003, 194). In this vein, I believe that it is a wise choice for further research to use multi-sited ethnography to study online slash fans of different media forms and genres or of celebrities in diverse cultures and nations. In so doing, researchers can better connect local realities with international, transnational, and cross-cultural contexts and better link online slash culture with a multitude of off-line, mainstream cultures across the world.

Nowadays, while queer communities are diversifying and proliferating in virtual spaces, academic debates worldwide in online queer studies are also multiplying. Some see online, non-mainstream sites as gathering points for queers (e.g., Gross 2003). Others understand online spaces as better locations for performing virtual queerness than off-line, mainstream environments (e.g., Bury 2005). Yet, these academic debates themselves also raise questions about the future of online queer studies. What should be the major focus of the research on online queer cultures and groups? Should we look at online queer spaces as pure, non-normative utopias or as anti-realist fantasy arenas? Is it necessary that the virtual spaces occupied by cultural and/or sexual minorities are freed from the influences of off-line normativity and hegemony of desires and sexualities? Do the cultural discrimination, isolation, and hierarchy subordinating certain gender, sexual, and cultural identities exist in these virtual queer spaces? Although far from answering all of these questions in depth, my

project has pointed out possible directions and laid them out for further academic

discussions. In line with some innovative research on Asian slash culture (e.g., Wood

2006; Yang & Bao 2012), my project has opened up new possibilities for a wide range

of explorations of non-Western, transnational, and cross-cultural slash.

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