

# The Study of Boy-love Culture and Its Social Reflection in Chinese Society

Runying Guo

Department of Philosophy, University College London, London, UK

Zctyrgu@ucl.ac.uk

**Abstract.** This essay focuses on the study of Boy-love culture which is a new tendency that has gained high popularity in recent decades, as the typical representation of subculture. In this article, it will firstly illustrate the formation and history of development of this culture, to clarify its attractive elements which let Boy-love culture differs with other fashion cultures nowadays, being prevalent globally. After that, it will further explore the reasons why Boy-love culture is so popular nowadays, considering both in the intrinsic significances side and its social influences side. Then a following series of effects will be introduced from positive to negative, to evaluate whether the culture should be encouraged more with advantages or prohibited to avoid further harms, in relation to the Chinese society case. Eventually, for those negative influences taken by the culture, some suggestions will be provided as a possible method to solve present problems occurred in Chinese society.

**Keywords:** Subculture, sexual minority, fantasy.

## 1. Introduction

Boy-love work is a new culture that has become highly popular in recent decades by the wild spreading of internet, which is a typical product mixed by ACG culture and subculture. In this essay, I will firstly give an interaction of boy-love culture, from its origin to the history of development nowadays and then the application in practice nowadays under Chinese society. Then, I will analyze why such culture has a great amount of popularity in the local environment, mostly supported by younger generations. The detailed reasons can be found after we are figuring out different kinds of impacts taken to dissimilar groups of people in the society.

## 2. Definition

The boy-love culture, which normally refers to the Boy's love (BL), is firstly created in Japanese arts fields by female, featuring a homosexual relationship between males. It often occurs in social media by different formations, such as manga, drama, novels, films, video games and so on. The feature of boy-love is notable, that their works are mostly made by women as their preferred creation towards a couple of boys they like. In the meantime, the ratio of female audiences is greater than male readers, differing with the homoerotic arts of men that created by and for men, especially homosexual male.

The first product initially occurred in the 1970s Japan, being a subgenre of girl's manga (shōjo manga) which was the representation of girls' fantasy. However, as a culture developed from Japan society, the history of boy-love or formally to say, the homosexuality, can go back to hundreds of years ago. In the ancient Japan, before the formation of homosexuality culture, it had already existed for long times in another way, the shudō and the kagama. The former one represented the homosexual love and relationship between samurai and their companions while the later one referred to the male sex workers who were students of kabuki actor's male. It seems like at that time the local attitude was relatively friendly to the sex minority group, they also had positions to make living for themselves in the society. However, the change appeared in Meiji Era during 1868–1912, manipulating by the practice of westernization so that the public turned to hostile attitudes and the anti-sodomy laws were published [1]. The whole society no longer welcomes homosexuality, at least it was hidden on the surface, although the spreading of such ideas never stops. Therefore, during this period the artists

were unable to freely narrated such special love any longer, instead, they were trying to use another veiled expression to accurately describe this homosexual love as possible as they can. Under such situation, being the predecessor of boy-love culture, there development of shōnen-ai genre was continuing with many excellent and famous literature works. The relationship between boys and young men represented as image of fragility, ephemerality and softness, created by their authors [2]. One of the most influential novels which regarded as the precursor to the shōnen-ai genre was that *A Lovers' Forest* by Mari Mori in 1961 [3]. In the following decades, the shōnen-ai culture permeated in the whole entertainment industry, combining with Japanese manga and therefore, the first Japanese manga was published in the 1970s [4]. Regarding its formation system, the majority of supporters and readers they attracted were female, young girls who addicted into imaging romantic love to homosexuals. Meanwhile, there were other groups of people attracted by such culture, the homosexual adults and lesbians [5, 6]. As the social sexual minor group, whatever for male or female sides, shōnen-ai culture seemed like an improvement to their social position, adverting the existence of sexual minority with rationality. In this era, numerous excellent works were created, spreading world-wide range. One classic masterpiece was Akimi Yoshida's *Banana Fish*, uploading between 1985 to 1994. Inspired by *Midnight Cowboy*, Yoshida started the production of *Banana Fish* to describe an intense connection between two characters — Ash and Eiji, focusing on their emotional change with further understanding of each other. As typified for realistic style works which was a narrating style greatly emerged in 1980s, *Banana Fish* rendered a great influence on the following creations about Shōnen'ai [7]. The whole culture as a unity had successfully merged with other industries so that rapidly grew up since 1990s and until the beginning of 21st century, its development was ceased by the Lost Decade. In contrast, however, differed with other normal industries, the influence brought to the BL industry was relatively small in local Japan society and the sales of related magazines was inclined [8]. Furthermore, there was an obvious increase in the ratio of male readers after 2000s, with 25-30 percentage. [9]

Meanwhile, the English market was gradually accepted BL culture, the first licensed English translation version of BL culture was published in North America in 2003 [10]. Nowadays, BL culture perfectly establishes its market worldwide and becomes one of the most popular tendencies in the new century.

### 3. Analysis

To analyze the present situation of BL culture and its fandom system, it can be primarily distinguished as three kinds of reason to illustrate the high popularity of this culture among young women and homosexual group.

The first is that the existence of BL culture itself is a wonderful fantasy for audiences to imagine a world without pains and inequalities, being a reason to receive high popularity [11]. Mainly working to female, that the BL culture provides them a chance to escape from social misogyny and stereotype gender roles, being an extension of sexual minority culture. On the one hand, in related products, both characters are male which indicates that no female role would be drawn and even deliberately vilified. Since authors and readers all pay their attention on male characters, focusing on their experiences and conducts, it is less likely to see malice towards women. Less possibilities refer to better entertaining process, in consequent, it is obvious to say that young female generations would prefer BL culture more than others. On the other hand, the BL culture seems as the most famous representation of all subcultures, to portray an ideal and wonderful environment that is entirely free of social bias and inequality issues [12]. At first, it is crucial to state that, the straight reason for BL culture to be prevailed is unrealistic love fantasy. This part shares the same principles with other BG (boy and girl) works especially on tv shows, which always present a dreamlike love story between two people with their own peculiarity respectively. Furthermore, differing with normal boy and girl works which female audiences are easy to enjoy by substituting themselves into the role of heroine, in BL works women also receive another enjoyment throughout playing a role of third-party to watch full process

of forming fantastic relationships. Now it is nearly clear to identify why BL culture can get incredible high popularity than other recent trends.

In the meantime, the social significance behind BL culture taken to the society is hard to neglect as the second kind of reason. To analyze the constituent of followers to BL culture, it also attains a large amount of appreciation because of the increased awareness of sexual minorities. Merely fairytale of love is not sufficient to attract such world-range tendency, many followers of BL culture are sexual minorities who are encouraged by related works. After the successful marketing of boy love, people gradually realize the reasonability of different kinds of sexualities so that the public attitude towards sexual minorities slightly changed. Therefore, supporting BL culture not only means a choice of preference within present trends, but also a protest prejudice against all sexual minorities such as lesbian and queer. Moreover, it seems that the majority consumers of BL industry are young female who are mainly heterosexual, indirectly proving the success of BL industry and its influences taken to heterosexual group who is not involve in [13].

In addition, these two primary reasons above theoretically demonstrate how BL culture is accepted by its own significance whereas the Bandwagon effect also works in the fields. It is a psychological phenomenon where individuals pursue certain actions or tendencies since there is someone else around them doing so and they choose to follow without reasonable intrinsic purpose [14]. In fact, it is a cognition bias here to render attitude manipulating issues which guide public ideas deliberately [15]. In related with BL tendency in China, this theory occurs with high frequency among younger generations both for teenage girls and boys. When they are in the process of growing up and getting in touch with social media, it is inevitable to understand BL culture. Then this new culture is easy to get likes from them, not only girls would enjoy those entertaining content as we explained before but also boys are also likely to be fandom no matter with their sexuality. For teenagers are more sensitive to any new elements that differ with their normal cognition built based on previous experiences. And that's why they tend to be more excited about new things in general.

As a result, connected with Bandwagon effect, when someone finds that all their friends around are talking about BL culture and related works as a hot topic frequently mentioned, they tend to present interests about this culture to sharing habits with peers, friends or colleagues. Given those reasons, the phenomenon that BL culture is drastically issued globally can be rationally explained. Additionally, based on these kinds of reasons, the tendency of future development to BL culture can be foreseen, that population will pay more and more attention on it, because of personal interests or social issues both.

#### 4. Suggestions

After identifying the history and development of BL culture, now we turn to see its social influences taken to different groups and applied functions whole society. In this part I will connect the local environment in Chinese society with BL culture, to explore its unique traits.

Firstly, it is undoubtably claim that BL culture perfectly blends with local culture so that explore a new industry to the whole market. Nowadays, in China, BL culture is widely spreading by utilizing different kinds of mediums such as music drama, novels, tv shows and so on. According to a Chinese data analysis of proportion of BL works in the market in 2017, it showed that nearly 70 percent of the most popular authors are creating things relate to BL culture while almost 80 percent of the most popular novels are portraying homosexual relationships. All those data were collected on one of the largest online reading sites in China which implies that data is reliable to reflect the true situation in local society. Derived from social media and internet, Chinese BL culture can rapidly develop in recent years, nonetheless, it also implicates a series of negative influences as it mainly habituates on cyberspace. The most serious one is the proliferation of obscenity and pornographic information [16]. Compared with the publishing method of other types of literature, BL works are mostly completed online with less limitations of context regulation. Network publishing contains information concealment ability which means that for those illegal and immoral related contexts that often present

in BL works such as incest and sexual abuse are more easily to be watched and spread. In consideration of the high proportion of underage BL audiences, it seriously has negative influences on their values and might indirectly cause their wrongness in the future.

However, there is also something positive about the benefits of BL culture taken to the society, for instance, that public's welcome attitude to sexual minorities. Undoubtedly the wide covering range and high famous level to the culture greatly expand people's recognition of sexual minorities so that help these minor groups to improve their social positions. In relation to the Chinese society, although lesbian and homosexual are still permitted in legislation, the social attitude has changed.

It seems urgent to seek a solution that can be useful to maximally avoid the spread of those negative ideas to local teenagers, and adults as well. However, considering of Chinese BL culture environment which homosexual and lesbian are still illegitimate while the significance of sexual minorities advertising is meaningful, it is difficult to find an effective advice in short term. Simultaneously, learning from the success of BL culture inspires many ideas to us which can be considered in other fields in similar principles.

## 5. Summary

Its inherent huge fans base implies that any form of creation related to BL culture can receive considerable attention from the public so that makes positive benefits in maximum. These benefits refer to financial benefits which have already been a common way for capitalists to create profits right now and ideological benefits that artists' ideas are more likely to be seen by public with huge amounts of attentions. Especially for ideas about sexuality, since BL culture is a subculture that raised from sexual minority. Thus, given that BL culture validly causes a change in people's perception of sexual minorities, it is the best choice to keep advertising the importance of sexuality equality based on high attractions of BL culture. Some authors have already mixed the culture with other minority groups in their works, for example, Japanese manga *Classmates* with its sequels were published in Opera since 2006. It also described a lesbian relationship on side characters later, although it was not explicit as the relationship between protagonists. Overall, it is predictable that BL industry will keep growing not only in Chinese society but also in the global range. Although there are a few drawbacks that appear during the rapid development, the culture itself is still a positive thing that rich local economy and public ideology together, speaking up for minorities.

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